銃皇無尽のファフニール
ブラック・ネメシス
VII
ツカサ
Illustration
梱枝りこ

Table of Contents

Prologue
Chapter 1 - Fictional Nostalgia
Part 1
Part 2
Part 3
Part 4
Part 5
Part 6
Chapter 2 - Boy Meets Girl at Dusk
Part 1
Part 2
Part 3
Part 4
Part 5
Part 6
Part 7
Chapter 3 - Newborn Predator
Part 1
Part 2
Part 3
Part 4
Part 5
Part 6
Chapter 4 - "Black" Vritra
Part 1
Part 2
Part 3
Epilogue
Afterword
Illustrator's Afterword

「あ、あの……**今日**は**特別**に、
頑張ったあなたへのご**褒美**として、
背中を**流**してさしあげますわ。
それに**二人**で**入**った**方**が**効率的**ですし――」
フィリルと同じようなことを言いながら、
顔を真っ赤にして浴室へ入ってくるリーザ。
体を隠すタオルが少し小さいせいか、
胸と下腹部が今にも見えそうになっている。
リーザ・ハイウォーカー
Lisa Highwalker

「だからここで――これが、終わりでいい。
終わりでいいから……」
そう言って彼女は顎を上げ、瞼を閉じた。
――悔しい。
何故、俺はこんなにも弱いのか。
せめて今だけは、彼女と釣り合う強さが欲しい。
イリス・フレイア
Iris Freyja

物部深月
Mitsuki Mononobe
「ちょっとした……夢があるんです。叶わないかもしれない、遠い夢ですけど」
フィリル・クレスト
Firill Crest
「それに……温泉の時みたいに、物部くん喜んでくれるかなって」
ティア・ライトニング
Tear Lightning
「だって……ティアはティアのままでいたいから。ユウを大好きな……お嫁さんのままで」
アリエラ・ルー
Ariella Lu
「まだ隠し事があったなんてね。いい加減、ボクも怒るよ？」

Prologue

Two calamities awakened.

Throb... Throb...
Heavy, forceful, regular beating.
The air shook accordingly in the dark and cramped laboratory.
In the fourth floor underground of Asgard's Far East Branch's First Laboratory—With the power supply cut, the interior was shrouded in darkness. Air conditioning and other cooling systems were all silent.
However, the lab where a dragon's corpse was kept was showing faint purple light.
The light source consisted of a Kraken's remains kept in a coffin. A silver tentacle with torn off ends, its midsection bulging unnaturally, glowing with purple light from within.
Staring into the coffin was John Hortensia, a crossdressing platinum blonde with golden eyes.
Dressed in military uniform, she was pointing her gun at the lab's director, Miyazawa Kenya, while gazing at the coffin's interior.
Throb... Throb... Throb...
Accompanying the deep pulsation sounds, the light inside the tentacle also brightened and dimmed.
Then she finally realized. This was the sound of a *heartbeat*.
The new life residing inside the remains. The Kraken's offspring.
Just as Miyazawa Kenya said earlier, this was the light of new life.
Throb... Throb... Throb...
The heartbeat gradually quickened and the purple light intensified progressively.
Ominous fetal movement.
It had arrived, no one could stop it anymore.
In front of John who had even forgotten to breathe, a tiny crack appeared on the bulging tentacle's surface.
A purple eye inside was revealed.
A powerful monster originally in eternal slumber—had now awakened.

Furthermore... Another calamity had awakened simultaneously.

The location was the forest of Fuji after the intense battle ended.
The top portion of the outrageously gigantic tree, reaching 5000 meters in height, had vanished. Near its base, there were two enormous cracks.
With its core functionality stolen by Tia Lightning, it was now a husk that had lost its computation power, merely waiting to rot.
However, this was a change precipitated by Yggdrasil.
From Yggdrasil's roots, which had eaten into the ground, something resembling black bubbles flowed out from its gaps.
They resembled black soap suds.
The black bubbles gradually accumulated and slowly rose into the sky.
However, no one noticed this calamitous change occurring the the depths of the Sea of Trees.
In this manner, two calamities had been released.
Liberated from the restraints of the ground, taking to the free skies—

*

"Don't worry, Tia will return the memories—back to Yuu."
Tia hugged me as though comforting me, whispering in my ear. Feeling the same pain I suffered from losing my memories, Tia cried with large teardrops falling—
One was supposed to react to such news with joy.
Reacting with relief at the return of lost memories would be the natural reaction.
But I could not even muster a single word of "thanks."
During the ride back to the Asgard lab on the Tokyo shore, I looked over Tia's shoulder around the interior of the van.
After an overnight battle against Yggdrasil, the girls were looking at the crying Tia in worry.
Under the gazes of the girls from Brynhildr Class, Shinomiya-sensei the homeroom teacher and Kili who had tagged along on her own, I stroked Tia's head.
"Thanks Tia. But... Give me some time."
To prevent others from overhearing, I whispered quietly in Tia's ear.
Due to the sudden *fear* in my heart, I did not take up this rare opportunity.
"...Sure?"
"Yeah, I'd like to have some mental preparation."
"Really? Then Tia... will sleep a bit."
She must have pushed herself to the limit for my sake. Leaning againt me, she soon fell asleep.
Seeing everyone staring at me, I forced a smile.
"Don't worry. She slept again once she felt reassured."
I held Tia carefully in my arms and explained.
"—She's probably feeling a bit confused. Well, it can't be helped. After all, she's taken Yggdrasil's place."
Kili explained with an expression as though looking at her own child.

"Strain must be unavoidable after doing something of that sort. We should let her have a good rest."
Looking after Tia all the time, Lisa spoke while gazing gently at her.
After everyone watched Tia's sleeping face for a while, Ariella yawned.
"Hwah... To be honest, we're tired out too. Let's rest until we get to the lab."
"Mm."
Sitting beside me, Ren concurred with Ariella.
"Yeah... I'll take a nap too. No mood to read either..."
Rubbing her sleepy eyes, Firill commented. Seeing everyone in this state, the captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad, Mitsuki, spoke up:
"Well then, let us all nap for a while. Shinomiya-sensei, is that alright?"
"No problem, get some good rest now. Good job, you all worked hard."
Shinomiya-sensei praised everyone and we rested in the van.
"Goodnight, Mononobe."
Iris smiled and said to me. Her silver hair was glittering under the rays of the morning sun.
"...Goodnight."
Throb. Seeing her smile, my heart pounded intensely in response.
Between me and her—There were definitely special feelings.
But once I retrieve my lost memories... What would happen to these feelings?
This was also the reason why I could not accept Tia's suggestion immediately.
Scared that my current feelings and personality would simply vanish, I hesitated and faltered.
Iris fell asleep immediately. After looking at her sleeping face, I turned towards Mitsuki.
Mitsuki had not fallen asleep. Noticing my gaze, she opened her eyes slightly.
"Nii-san, you should catch some sleep sooner. Time on the way back to the lab for resting is limited."
"Yeah, I know."
I smiled at Mitsuki and closed my eyes.
My heart hurt intensely. It was the guilt from parading myself matter-of-factly as her brother. Furthermore, there was disappointment that I had forgotten all shared memories and the promise with her.
Having lost my memories, I might have been hurting Mitsuki unintentionally.
Absolutely—Unacceptable.
This strong impulse filled my heart. It was as though "the real me" was screaming in my heart.
My feelings for Iris and guilt towards Mitsuki were colliding chaotically in my heart.
Devoured by the turbulent vortex, I gradually sank into deep slumber.

Along the way, due to congestion on the roads, it was already noon by the time we reached the Asgard lab.
The malfunctioning in electronic devices caused by Yggdrasil was the reason for the gridlock. Due to Yggdrasil's core transferring into Tia, cars were able to move again. However, the power outage had caused many accidents, hence there were many congested roads.
However, there was something unexpected when our detouring brought us to the back of the research lab.
"What happened here...?"
Carrying the soundly sleeping Tia on my back as I got off the van, I looked at the barricade tape surrounding the lab premises and exclaimed in surprise.
"I can see smoke... Don't tell me there's a fire?"
Iris looked at the smoke billowing above the lab and tilted her head uneasily.
"Did an accident happen during the power outage...?"
Lisa frowned and watched across the barricade tape.
Stationed on guard around the facility were not police but armed soldiers.
"They are NIFL troops. In any case, let us first ask what happened."
After seeing the emblem worn by the soldiers, Mitsuki and Shinomiya-sensei went together to approach the soldiers standing near the barricade tape.
"...It feels like something very troublesome happened. Now it'll be difficult to meet up with Jeanne-chan—no, John."
Looking out through the van window, Kili whispered softly.
As a deemed disaster, Kili was currently hunted on NIFL's wanted list. It would be bad if she were discovered here.
"You should leave before a crowd gathers. Right now—I'll pretend I didn't see anything."
I quietly answered Kili.
"Oh my, I can?"
"This time, well... It's all thanks to your help."
Although Kili performing modifications on Tia for the purpose of defeating Yggdrasil was definitely inhumane, it was true that we could not have returned safe and sound had she not been there.
"Is that so? Thanks. Goodbye, Yuu. Next you next time. I leave Tia in your care."
Thanking in light tone of voice, Kili swiftly disembarked.
Nearby, Ariella noticed Kili's movements but did not take any action to stop her.
"Although we might be enemies next time we meet... No helping it."
Ariella smiled wryly and watched Kili leave.
"Oh—Mitsuki and Sensei are back."
Hearing Firill, I looked in the lab's direction.

Next, I saw Mitsuki and Shinomiya-sensei coming, accompanied by Miyazawa Kenya, the lab's director.
"...Mm."
Ren leaned towards me and grabbed my sleeve all at once. Miyazawa Kenya was Ren's father. It looked like Ren still had trouble facing him after the direct confrontation. Sure enough, she must have complicated feelings.
Taking a closer look, I noticed Miyazawa Kenya had a cast on his arm. He was injured but it was unknown whether it had anything to do with the lab's situation.
"Hi, I am relieved to see that all of you are fine. Looks like the operation succeeded and Yggdrasil has been vanquished."
Smiling warmly, he looked like he was happy for our safe return, but for someone like me, who had caught a deeper glimpse into this lab's research, would know it was merely social pleasantries.
"Yeah, well... I guess it's a success."
We looked at one another and I answered ambiguously.
Yggdrasil was not destroyed. Instead, its core was now under Tia's control—
We had no intention of reporting this situation to him. Otherwise, Tia would most likely end up as his newest research subject.
At least before returning to Midgard, we must keep this a secret and not let anyone others know.
We had already obtained Shinomiya-sensei's consent during our trip back on the van. Prioritizing the safety and human right of Ds was Midgard's policy.
"It's such a shame that all observation equipment could not be used, preventing me from watching your battle. Please be as detailed as possible in the report submission. Thanks."
Miyazawa Kenya spoke to me like a researcher. Ren stepped forward.
"—Putting that aside, that."
Pointing at the lab that was now barred from entry, Ren asked.
"Oh, right... I should explain the lab's current situation first. It must have surprised you guys on your return, right?"
"Yeah, so what exactly happened?"
I looked at the strictly barricaded lab and inquired.
"When the electrical system went down, the facilities went haywire. There were many underground explosions and I got caught up in it."
He looked at his arm in the cast and replied.
"Explosion accidents huh..."
"Yes, because of that, entry to the lab is now forbidden. Your belongings have already been moved out by staff, so just find another place to stay."
Hearing what he said, Lisa showed a troubled expression on her face.
"Even if you ask us to find a place to stay, given the current traffic chaos, accommodations must be full everywhere. Shinomiya-sensei, could we not return to Midgard directly?"

"We can't return immediately because of various aftermath handling. Furthermore, aircraft are absolutely forbidden until it is confirmed that the abnormal electromagnetic interference has vanished completely. We will probably need to stay two or three more days in Japan before we can leave."
Shinomiya-sensei crossed her arms and answered. Then Mitsuki raised her hand.
"Excuse me... In that case, how about coming to Nii-san and my home?"
"Eh? Mononobe and Mitsuki-chan's home?"
Iris exclaimed in surprise. Firill clapped her hands together before her chest.
"I... would like to go. I'm curious about Mononobe-kun's home."
"I-I am interested too—However, is it really okay to impose so suddenly?"
Lisa asked Mitsuki in a fluster.
"The original plan was to pay a visit if time permitted, so that is not an issue. Shinomiya-sensei, is that fine?"
Mitsuki answered Lisa then inquired of Shinomiya-sensei.
"Yes... I must stay in Tokyo to handle the aftermath. All of you can have free time for now until preparations are ready to return to Midgard. Take a vacation."
"Much appreciated!"
Mitsuki happily bowed her head to express thanks. However, I froze at the thought of suddenly returning home.
This meant that I had to reunite with my parents whom I did not get a chance to see because I fainted during the school festival.
To be honest, I was not prepared at all.
"Nii-san, this is wonderful!"
However, Mitsuki sought my opinion happily. I forced myself to nod.
"Yeah, that's great."
The chance Tia gave me to recover my memories and suddenly returning home—
Fate seemed to be whispering to me, telling me that it was now time for me to turn back into myself.
Nevertheless—
"Mononobe?"
Iris noticed my gaze and cocked her head.
—I can't turn back yet.
Turning back into my old self without informing her, I absolutely could not do that.

Chapter 1 - Fictional Nostalgia

Part 1

Inside the lab premises sealed off by NIFL troops, Miyazawa Kenya was walking alone.
The soldiers walking past him all wore tense expressions as though about to fight a formidable foe, speaking in quiet voices.
Amidst the tense atmosphere, Miyazawa Kenya walked over to the large hole on the side of the lab building and stopped.
The hole was very deep, extending downwards in a slant. The deep end could not be seen at all.
He knew that this hole led to the fourth floor underground.
The hole's walls were abnormally smooth, as though sliced by a blade.
"—Seriously, I can't believe I survived under those circumstances. I must be pretty damn lucky."
Touching the cast on his arm, he muttered to himself in self-deprecation.
At this moment, a man approached him from behind and patted him on the shoulder.
"Are you the one in charge here?"
"Hmm? Indeed. And you are?"
Miyazawa Kenya looked back and examined the man in front of him. A man with a cold gaze was the first impression. Next, he felt a strong sense of deja vu.
—So similar to *him*.
He recalled the meddlesome young man who was on good terms with his daughter.
A nice guy to a fault versus a cold man.
Despite their difference in style or the lack of facial similarity, these two people overlapped in image on a certain point.
"I am Loki Jotunheim. Rank is Major. I was sent by NIFL to handle this incident."
"Now that is truly unfortunate for you to be caught up in this kind of nuisance. You have my deepest sympathies. I am Miyazawa Kenya, the director of this lab. We will be seeing much of each other for the time being and I look forward to working with you."
Miyazawa Kenya extended his hand in a business-like manner. Major Loki shook it with a smile.
His hand felt as cold as his gaze.

"I'm already used to these types of assignments. However, what a major incident. The higher-ups have issued an extermination order for *that*."
"It was an unexpected accident but to have concealed that kind of thing in Asgard and even allowed it to escape—If the public were to find out, the organization's reputation would suffer irrevocably."
Miyazawa Kenya stared into the depths of the hole and concurred with Major Loki.
"Unexpected huh. I was clearly about to hold you responsible, yet you can still remain so calm. You look quite relaxed."
"Truth be told, quite. As a researcher, I still wish for it to be captured alive if possible."
Miyazawa Kenya made a crooked smile.
"That is impossible. That thing will be exterminated by my team—Sleipnir."
"...Will they manage?"
Confronted with Miyazawa Kenya's taunting question, Major Loki smiled fearlessly.
"Even if they fail, I'll just let *him* take action."
"Him?"
Seeing Miyazawa Kenya frown, Major Loki spoke calmly:
"The strongest killer I raised. In this country—'Fafnir' is visiting."

Part 2

"Wow! So this is the town where Mononobe grew up!"
Iris leaned towards the window and exclaimed in joy while watching the surrounding scenery.
For around four hours now, we were riding a large van with a member of Asgard staff as the driver.
After the long journey, the van drove into an inland mountain town in the central region—Nanato City.
This was apparently Mitsuki's and my hometown.
After traveling through a long tunnel, an overarching view of the entire town could be seen from the windows. Being sandwiched between two great mountains could be considered a kind of characteristic.
Although it was not extremely rural, Nanato could not be described as one of those modernized and developed regional cities.
It was no different from those towns we passed along the way.
A river ran through the middle of town, glittering under the rays of the setting sun.
"Compared to Tokyo, this place is much more quiet and peaceful!"
Iris had gotten very excited after hearing Mitsuki propose taking everyone to our hometown. However, I totally felt nothing despite seeing my hometown right before my eyes.
Having lost all memories beyond three years ago, it was like seeing this scenery for the first time. I was hoping some nostalgia might be evoked by the sight, but now it looked like there were no such feelings.
Once again, I realized how massively losing my memories would change me.
To think that the gap between my past and current selves would be this far.
"Hey Mononobe-kun, which side is your home?"
Firill looked out the window and asked me. Of all the girls here, only she, Mitsuki and Ariella did not know about my memory loss.
"Well, which side, lemme see..."
Of course I could not possibly know. My only choice was to avoid eye contact and answer ambiguously.
"You forgot because it's been too long?"
I jumped upon hearing Ariella's joke.
"Nii-san, look, it is over there. The shopping street with the arcade, around that vicinity."
Mitsuki pointed at a part of town.

"Oh, right—I remember now."
I nodded stiffly while she waxed nostalgically.
"Fufu... When we were young, we often looked for our home's location from the observation platform there."
"—Yeah."
I half-heartedly concurred with Mitsuki, escaping eye contact, not daring to look at her.
The guilt of acting as "Mononobe Yuu" was making my heart hurt immensely.
"Yuu..."
Having just woke up, Tia looked at me as though wanting to say something.
I looked around and saw Iris, Lisa and Ren watching me with worry.
These four knew of my memory loss. In other words, they probably realized what I was feeling inside.
I stroked Tia's head and smiled at the girls to tell them not to worry.
"It has been two years for me and three for Nii-san since we left. When I called home earlier... Mother was so happy. Nii-san, you really should call more often."
"We'll meet immediately so it's fine. Also, is it really possible to accommodate so many people?"
I tried as hard as I could do to respond to Mitsuki as usual and brought up a question that concerned me.
"There is no problem with space if we use my house as well. However, there might not be enough ingredients for dinner, so Mother hurried out to shop."
..."My house"?
I totally did not understand what Mitsuki meant by that but I could not ask her directly.
To get a grasp on my location, I looked seriously at the scenery of the hometown I could no longer remember.
After going down a slope, the van drove along the river. After passing the arcade shopping street, we were brought to the place where Mitsuki had indicated earlier.
The van made a U-turn and drove off after dropping us off. Shinomiya-sensei was apparently going to pick us up for the return journey.
In front of us was a two-story wooden house. Compared to the newer designs of neighboring buildings, it felt a bit historical.
The family name on the plate read—Mononobe.
A gust of wind brought floral fragrance unique to this town.
For the first time, I finally felt a sense of nostalgia.
Although I had no memories of the town's scenery or impressions of the house, my body still remembered this distinctive air.
After taking a few deep breaths, feelings of my childhood spread through my entire body from the air entering my lungs.
"...I finally feel like I've arrived somewhere truly Japanese."
Looking at the house with the tiled roof, Firill remarked with emotion.

"Indeed... There is a feeling of Japanese culture."
Lisa looked at my house inquisitively and agreed.
"Tokyo was totally unlike what I imagined Japan to be like. There were no samurai or ninjas."
Seeming quite surprised, Iris walked back and forth, looking around.
"No, I don't think there will be samurai or ninjas here either."
"Mm."
Having lived in Japan the whole time they were with Miyazawa Kenya, Ariella and Ren smiled wryly while corrected Iris' mistake.
"Hey Yuu. It smells really good."
Tia pulled my hand and commented. Speaking of which, there was definitely a very appetizing aroma in the air.
"I suppose Mother is preparing dinner. Since the car is absent, Father is not home from work yet. Okay, Nii-san, stop spacing out over there and hurry inside."
Mitsuki urged me and entered the yard without ringing the doorbell. Since it was her own home, she had no reservations.
Opening the door with a clatter, Mitsuki announced loudly in the house.
"I have returned! Mother, we are home!"
Then with a meow from the depths of the corridor, a black cat walked out.
"Oh, it's a cat!"
Iris exclaimed happily. Smiling, Mitsuki approached the black cat and stroked it. It seemed to be the Mononobe family cat.
"Ohagi, I am so glad to see you in good health."
"Me~ow."
The black cat—Ohagi—meowed as though responding. Then walking over to my feet, it rubbed itself against me.
"Looks like it still remembers you, Nii-san, even though you have not looked after it this whole time. So I guess the one who picked it up ultimately holds a dear place in its heart?"
Mitsuki grumbled to me.
"I-I never looked after it?"
Troubled, I asked because I had no memories of the cat at all.
"No, it is not that you never looked after it, but when you picked up Ohagi, Hekatonkheir—"
Just as Mitsuki tried to continue, a patter of footsteps interrupted her.
"Welcome home, Mitsuki and Yuu."
A voluptuous middle-aged woman walked out from the depths of the corridor.
She was probably my mother, even though I had no idea. However, even though she treated me very nicely, she still felt like a stranger to me.
"Mitsuki, I have waited a long time. And Yuu... finally came home."
Mother—the one who seemed to be her—smiled gently at me.
"It has been a long time."
Due to nervousness, I used polite speech without thinking.

"Come on, what are you getting nervous about? This is your home, right? Don't be shy, girls, come in and have a seat."
This woman—my mother—urged us with a wry smile.
"T-Thank you for having us. Oh, I ought to remove my shoes, isn't that correct?"
Lisa's voice sounded strangely stiff as she took off her shoes and entered the house. We followed.
"This way. In any case, let us all go to the living room first."
Leading us, Mitsuki and Mother walked to the living room. Ohagi also came along.
Passing through the creaky corridor and opening a partition, we reached a room the size of eight tatami mats.
Sitting on seat cushions, we gathered around the table in the middle.
"Wow! Tatami, it's my first time touching it."
Iris touched the tatami and remarked happily.
"Onii-chan... Here, I should seiza?"
Sitting beside me, Ren asked quietly.
"No, it's fine, just sit casually."
I looked around. Mitsuki was sitting beautifully in formal seiza posture, but without being too rigid, so it was fine.
"Thank goodness. I am not good at seiza."
Ren breathed a sigh of relief, relaxed and allowed her leg posture to collapse.
"My legs are getting numb... I guess I won't seiza either."
Iris was imitating Mitsuki. After hearing my conversation with Ren, she relaxed too.
"I will endure longer."
However, among the girls, Firill continued to keep her back straight in seiza posture.
"Firill, it's best you don't strain yourself too much, okay?"
Likewise sitting in seiza, Lisa cautioned Firill.
"...The same goes for you, Lisa. It's not necessary to present yourself in front of Mononobe-kun's mother."
"Y-You are talking about yourself, right? I am simply doing as the Romans do."
Lisa replied frantically then threw a sideways glance at Firill.
However, they both showed strain on their faces. Seiza was probably tough for them.
"I'm not responsible if you can't stand up later."
Ariella looked at them as though they were idiots.
"Wha—"
The black cat, Ohagi, came over and jumped on my lap.
"Looks like it really remembers me."
This feeling of nostalgia was making me very glad. At the same time, I felt deeply conflicted that the cat remembered me but I had forgotten it

completely. Just as I had nothing to do and was stroking Ohagi's back, Ren looked at me with eyes of anticipation.
"Onii-chan, can I touch it?"
"Oh sure."
"Thank you... It's my first time touching a cat."
Ren happily reached out and stroked Ohagi's jet black fur. Although Ohagi moved its ears in fright, it did not move away and curled up in my lap.
"……So cute."

Smiling radiantly, Ren continued to stroke Ohagi.
Mother brought drinks at this time. After setting down the tea before each of us, she sat down next to Mitsuki. Then looking at everyone, she spoke:
"We already met at the school festival, but allow me to introduce myself again. I am Mononobe Yoshimi, Yuu and Mitsuki's mother."
Mother nodded and greeted everyone.
Mononobe Yoshimi—I committed this name to memory. I could not even recall the name of my parents.
"It was very rushed during the festival when Nii-san was transported to the infirmary. Everyone starting with Lisa, could you introduce yourself again?"
"Understood."
Hearing Mitsuki, Lisa started the self-introductions.
"My name is Lisa Highwalker. Sorry for intruding on this sudden visit. Thank you for your hospitality."
After Lisa introduced herself while sitting in seiza, everyone introduced themselves in student number sequence.
"My name is Firill Crest. I am really really good friends with Mononobe-kun."
For some reason, Firill's introduction seemed to emphasize "really" in particular.
"I'm Ariella Lu. Nice to meet you."
In contrast to Lisa and Firill's formal airs, Ariella introduced herself in a casual tone of voice.
"……Ren Miyazawa."
Still stroking Ohagi, Ren named herself quietly.
"I'm Iris Freyja! I'm, umm… really really good friends with Mononobe, and we're always helping each other out!"
As though competing with Firill, Iris also applied great emphasis in her tone of voice.
"Tia will become Yuu's bride one day! So Yoshimi is Tia's mama!"
However, Tia refused to admit defeat and made a bold declaration, frightening me.
"Hey Tia—"
"Fufu, what a cute little fiancee. I would be very happy to gain another daughter."
However, Mother smiled and responded, treating it as a child's joke.
"……Tia got ahead of you, Lisa."
Firill patted Lisa on the shoulder and commented. Lisa's face instantly turned bright red.
"F-Firill, doesn't the same go for you? I am not…"
"Hmm…"
Iris pouted in frustration. As expected, she had called herself "friend" only out of concern for Mitsuki.
"Then I will go get dinner ready. Please rest well, everyone."
Chuckling to herself as she watched us, Mother stood up.

"Oh Mother, let me help you."
Mitsuki instantly stood up.
"No need. It's rare enough for you two to visit, I'd like to show off today. Mitsuki, accompany everyone and show them around the house."
"—Understood. How is the other house?"
"Since have been cleaning and tidying regularly, it shouldn't be that messy or dirty. However, the electricity and water supply is cut, so it probably can only serve as a place to sleep."
"That is good enough already. Thank you, Mother."
Mother left the room after that. Ariella asked Mitsuki:
"Hey, what does the other house mean?"
I wanted to ask the same question. Smiling wryly, Mitsuki answered:
"Eh... Actually, my parents passed away when I was little. After that, I was adopted into Nii-san's family. As a result, the adjacent house was where I used to live with my birth parents."
While looking at everyone, Mitsuki explained in embarrassment.
"Oh... I see now. Sorry, I didn't know—"
Ariella apologized, feeling bad. After finding out that Mitsuki and I were not blood-related siblings, the others looked quite shocked. Iris was the only one without any change in expression.
In Iris' case, she already knew about this relationship when I explained to her about the childhood marriage promise between Mitsuki and me.
—Mitsuki and I were childhood friends and neighbors.
After Mitsuki explained, I felt a little relieved. However, this was something matter-of-fact for my past self. At this rate, I was going to be exposed sooner or later.
"N-No need to apologize... Weird speculation might arise if it was publicized that we had no blood relations, which would make things difficult to explain... Umm, please do not mind. I did have the intention of looking for a chance to explain to everyone."
Seeing Mitsuki explain frantically, I felt like my emotions were in a mess. If I asked about the past, everything would get exposed.
"Well, Mitsuki-san and Mononobe Yuu have to live in the same dormitory, isn't that right? Then it cannot be helped. Furthermore, despite being an adopted daughter, the sibling relationship is for certain... Mitsuki-san, there is no need for you to be so sensitive about it."
Lisa soothed Mitsuki's anxieties on everyone's behalf. No one said "so you're not real siblings" or continued to pry.
The same went for me. Although there were many things I wanted to find out, the sight of Mitsuki's expression gave me pause.
"...Thank you, everyone."
After seeing our reactions, Mitsuki thanked in relief.
"Then let's hurry and go tidy the house. We just walk over from this house to that one, right?"
Under the slightly heavy atmosphere, Ariella cheerfully asked Mitsuki.

"Ah yes.. It would be too cramped if all eight of us were to stay on this side. So let us separate just for sleeping. However, as stated earlier, there is no water or electricity in that house. Hence, you will need to take baths and use the washroom on this side."
"It'll be a bit inconvenient going to the toilet at night. I don't really mind, but those who are afraid of the dark should sleep on this side."
Ariella commented and looked at Tia, the youngest present.
"T-Tia can go to the toilet alone!"
Tia retorted with her face all red.
"Okay, then let us divide up based on the house's size and the usual rooming arrangements. The master bedroom on that side is the most spacious, so Lisa-san, Firill-san and Tia-san will go over together. Ariella-san and Ren-san can have my former room. Iris will stay on this side with me in my present room."
After assigning rooms decisively, Mitsuki looked at us.
"...What about me?"
Mitsuki stared at me in exasperation when I raised the question.
"Nii-san, you will sleep alone in your own room. Or are you telling me... You would like to room with someone?"
"N-No, nothing like that. Just kidding."
Under Mitsuki's gaze, I explained in panic. On further thought, it was only logical for me to have my own room here. Due to a lack of memories, I accidentally asked the question.
"Good grief... Anyone else have objections? In that case, before dinner is ready, let us get the rooms ready. It will be pitch black in the other house once the sun sets."
Looking at the setting sun outside the window, Mitsuki spoke.
Everyone nodded in agreement and got up from their seat cushions. Lying on my lap, Ohagi jumped down and walked over to the window to bask in the sun.
Mitsuki went to the kitchen to find Mother and returned with a key. It was probably the key to Mitsuki's house.
We exited the entrance, following Mitsuki and made our way to the neighboring house.
The mailbox was stuffed with all sorts of letters. It was clearly a vacant home at a glance.
However, when Mitsuki opened the main door and entered, I could see that the entrance hall was occupied with cardboard boxes. The house was probably being used for storage.
Despite looking quite old outside, the inside was relatively new. The ground floor rooms had western designs without anything like sliding screens.
—Mitsuki lived here when she was young.
I must have come here to play in the past, but I totally could not recall memories from that time.

"The bedroom is on the second floor. The rooms on the ground floor are quite cluttered and a bit dangerous, so do not wander around after dark."
Mitsuki reminded everyone to take care then walked up the stairs to the second floor. The banisters were not very worn. In other words, the house had not been lived in for very long.
"This was my parents' bedroom. This side was mine."
After reaching the second floor, Mitsuki indicated the two rooms to us.
There was nothing left in Mitsuki's room apart from a bed. Everything had probably been moved when Mitsuki moved into my home. Then I looked into Mitsuki's parents' bedroom on the opposite side where the furniture was untouched. There was a very large two-person bed, enough for three people to sleep on.
"Then hurry and get the rooms ready. There are not enough blankets on this side, so could you carry some futons over later?"
Pointing at her former room, Mitsuki said to me.
"Got it. I'll do the manual labor."
As the only boy, this could not be helped. Smiling wryly, I accepted the job.
Hence, we started to perform simple cleaning while the sun was setting and the interior was a bit dark. Then opening the windows for some fresh air, I looked at my house next door.
"—Before we became siblings, we used to talk to each other like this."
Walking up beside me, Mitsuki commented nostalgically.
The room on the other side with the drawn curtains was probably my bedroom.
"Yeah..."
Unable to recall anything, I could only imagine painfully and concur.
"Chatting till late at night, I even made my parents mad."
"Yeah—that too."
These fake responses pained my heart immensely.
"I am the only one who inherited this house... It would be better to sell the house if I am not living in it—But there are too many memories here. I cannot let go. Also..."
At this point, Mitsuki looked up at me.
"Also?"
"I have a... dream. That being said, it is a very distant dream, impossible to achieve."
Blushing, Mitsuki spoke in slight embarrassment.
"What kind of dream is it?"
"—I have to keep it a secret from you, Nii-san. Okay, time to move the futons over. The bedsheets also need to be changed. I am counting on you, Nii-san."
Ending the conversation one-sidedly, Mitsuki patted me on the shoulder.
I obeyed Mitsuki even though I still had questions. If she continued to reminisce like this, my heart would not be able to endure.
After I exited the room on my own, Iris poked her head out to look at me.

"Oh Mononobe, are you returning to the other house?"
"Yeah, to get futons and bedsheets."
"Then could you ask to see if there's something like a light? It's quite inconvenient if there are no lights at night after all."
"Got it."
I nodded in agreement, then in the middle of leaving, I stopped.
"...Iris, could you meet me later? I need to tell you something."
I looked back and said to her in a serious tone of voice.
"You can't do it now?"
"It's very important and only for the two of us to know."
"—I understand."
Iris nodded seriously too.
"Then tonight, find a chance to go out."
After saying that, I went down the stairs. Naturally, what I wanted to tell her was Tia's suggestion.
But if we were to discuss, I did not know how Iris would answer.
Hence, I must firm my own will before the discussion.
—To prevent Iris from having to agonize over the decision.

Part 3

"My name is Mononobe Kai. Thank you for taking care of Yuu and Mitsuki. Please continue to be good friends with them."
While we were getting the house ready, my father—Mononobe Kai—came over to greet everyone. A kind and thoughtful man.
Dinner was already set out on the living room table. The lovely aroma was stimulating our appetites. At this moment, someone's stomach rumbled. All the girls made a "not me" look and avoided eye contact. Ohagi the black cat was the first to begin eating its catfood, not caring about us at all.
"Oh sorry, you must be famished. Come, don't be shy, let's eat, everyone."
Smiling wryly, Father picked up his chopsticks and announced the beginning of the meal.
Everyone started to eat. During the meal, they introduced themselves to my father.
I listened while eating silently.
—The taste was great.
Meat and potato stew, boiled vegetables, miso soup... All nostalgic flavors.
Despite losing my memories, my body still remembered the flavors themselves.
"Nii-san, Mother's cooking is really wonderful."
"Yeah."
For the first time, I answered Mitsuki while facing her for real.
"It's different from what I understood as the taste of Japanese cooking. Not to say it is not delicious, but there is this modest feeling..."
Eating the meat, Lisa offered her comments in surprise.
"Lisa, this is how it should be. It's what they call 'mother's taste.'"
Drinking a sip of miso soup, Firill offered praise.
"Indeed, in those manga and novels that you brought, upon returning to their hometown to eat their mothers' cooking, people are always brought to tears in emotion."
Saying that, Lisa looked at me while I was eating.
"No, I'm not gonna cry."
I answered tentatively first.
"Mononobe, you don't have to hold it in."
"If you wanna cry, Tia will lend bosom to you!"
However, Iris and Tia thought I was holding back and looked at me in worry.

"No, like I said—"
"Mononobe-kun, we won't laugh at you even if you cry."
"Mm."
Ariella and Ren joined in the fun. I sighed in resignation.
"You are all such good girls."
Watching them, Mother chuckled to herself.
The dinner atmosphere was very lively. By the time I noticed, the meal was over in an instant.
"The hot water is ready. You should all take baths in sequence."
After clearing up, Mother reminded us to bathe.
"Then you go first, Nii-san."
"Eh, I can?"
I was thinking the girls would be resistant to the idea of entering the bath after a guy. However, Mitsuki nodded seriously.
"No problem. With so many girls, it will probably take a long time. You should go wash up first and go to bed. You must be tired with only the brief nap on the van."
Mitsuki urged me with a smile. I felt strongly that she really was my *family*.
Since no one objected, I took the towel Mother had handed to me and went to the bathroom. Although I had no memories of the bathroom's direction, I had pretty much figured out this house's layout.
After removing my clothes in the changing area, I entered the bathroom. It was roughly a size larger than my bathrooms at Midgard and the research lab, a family bathroom that was not especially huge. There were signs of redecoration in the bathroom and looked a bit newer than the one back home.
Lisa and Firill were probably going to be disappointed that this was not a hot spring-style bath. I broke out in cold sweat at the thought.
I exhaled deeply after soaking myself in the tub. As Mitsuki said, I was truly exhausted.
I stretched and spaced out, looking at the ceiling. While I was reminiscing over my experiences, I suddenly noticed someone's presence in the changing area.
A petite figure behind the frosted glass. I could guess who it was based on her outline and the color of her hair.
"H-Hey..."
No way. I broke out in cold sweat. The sound of undressing in the changing area stopped. The door gradually opened.
"Yuu, Tia will join in the bath."
Looking at me shyly, Tia went bright red.
"J-Join in!?"
I cried out in surprise. Tia immediately showed panic on her face.
"Shhh! Not so loud! Or else Lisa and others will notice."
Tia placed her finger on her lip and shushed. Then fully naked, she entered the bathroom.

Despite a pubescent body, her chest was showing minor signs of growth. Without any flab at her waist, Tia's elegant curves were emphasizing Tia's feminine charms.
Furthermore, Tia seemed quite shy today, covering up her privates with her hands. Previously at the hot spring, she was still so innocent, not hiding herself at all.
Her shyness made the sight even more racy. I frantically looked away.
"W-What are you doing?"
"Because you... are worried about Tia. Also, you looked brokenhearted the whole time today."
Hearing her, I looked back at her. Tia's skin had gone red from embarrassment, but she looked at me seriously.
"Looks like—I've been like that all day."
Hearing my whispers, Tia nodded and quietly entered the tub, soaking herself, leaving only her head above the surface.
Sitting in the space in front of me with her knees drawn up to her chest, Tia stared at me intently.
"Yuu, are you okay?"
"I'm fine... Although many things are definitely troubling me, I think I'll manage. No need to worry."
I pulled myself together slightly and smiled at Tia.
"Rather, I'm more worried about you. After devouring Yggdrasil's core, do you feel unwell anywhere?"
After a nap in the van, she looked recovered. But was that actually the case? I asked Tia in return.
"No problem anymore. I've used my own will to suppress the information from the Akashic Record."
"Akashic Record?"
Suddenly hearing this unfamiliar term, I frowned.
"It is Yggdrasil's function, the power to amass information and process it... Controlling electricity is just a side effect. The Akashic Record is the circuit of omniscience that chronicles all information observed by Yggdrasil."
Tia spoke fluently using terms that she normally did not use.
"Then... There's nothing you don't know anymore, Tia?"
"Hmm, I might get devoured if I *go too deeply* into the Akashic Record, so it's best to control myself not to know too much."
Tia shook her head and said with her face red.
"Because... Tia only needs to be Tia. To keep loving Yuu... To be Yuu's bride."
Saying that, Tia shyly immersed half of her face into the water.
These actions and words made my heart rate accelerate. Furthermore, I understood too what kind of resolve she had committed herself during the battle against Yggdrasil.
"For my sake, Tia, you really worked hard. Truly... Thank you."

To express gratitude that words could not convey, I stroked Tia's head. Tia grabbed my hand, raised her head from the water and leaned in towards me.
"Mm-hmm... But Tia is not confident about keeping the old Tia. Because, last time in a bath with Mitsuki, the three of us, or at the hot spring... Tia's heart did not beat so fast."
Tia pulled my hand and pressed it against her left breast. I could feel a slight bulge even though it was not big.
"Wha—"
My thoughts suddenly halted. Feeling the heartbeat transmitted to my hand, my mind went blank.
"Yuu, can you feel Tia's heartbeat?"
"Y-Yeah..."
I nodded partially out of reflex, then moved my hand slightly. Tia's body suddenly shuddered.
"Mm... It feels so strange, touched by Yuu. Although a bit scary... It's very comfortable."
Flushed red in the face, Tia covered my hand with her hands.
"Ya... Ah... Mm..."
The softly bulging elasticity and the flower bud that strongly emphasized its existence was paralyzing my thoughts.
"Hey Yuu... Is Tia very weird right now?"

Blushing intensely, Tia asked me uneasily.
"No, I think... You're not weird at all. At least, probably, it's due to Yggdrasil."
Not knowing how to answer, I replied ambiguously.
But Tia was reassured and her expression relaxed.
"Thank goodness... Then, if it's not weird, Tia doesn't need to keep holding back what Tia wants to do."
Saying that, Tia hugged me from the front.
"H-Hey—"
I panicked from the direct skin contact. Unconcerned, Tia pressed herself tightly against my body.
"Yuu, tell Tia whenever you are ready."
"Huh?"
I hesitated for a moment, only to realize she was referring to my memories.
"Any time, no matter when, Tia will support Yuu. So, the precious memories... must return."
Tia hugged me tightly and looked up at me. I could feel Tia's sincere feelings, but was too moved to say anything.
The force Tia's body exerted. The refreshing fragrance that cleansed one's soul. The sensation of smooth and soft skin.
All this was depriving me of the ability to think when I heard a noise from the changing area.
I instantly regained my senses and Tia separated from me with her face red.
The person in the changing area removed her clothing like Tia and quietly opened the bathroom door.
"Ah... Tia is here as expected. She stole ahead again..."
Wrapped in a towel, Firill entered.
Seeing me in the tub with Tia, she sighed.
"W-Why are you coming in too, Firill!?"
I asked frantically. Firill tilted her head slightly.
"Because bathing together is more efficient with so many of us."
"What efficiency..."
"Also... Mononobe, I want to make you as happy as that time at the hot spring."
Firill smiled with blushing cheeks then stepped into the tub, submerging herself. With three people in the tub, the water overflowed and spilled out.
The bathtub was not that big. Hence, after Firill squeezed in, Tia and I were pressed tightly together again.
"Ah..."
Leaning her head against my chest, Tia curled up shyly.
"Mononobe-kun, sorry for making the tub so crowded."
Leaning against my shoulder, Firill spoke quietly. Seeing her large breasts floating on the water, I could not deny that my heart rate was gradually accelerating.
But at this moment, someone else seemed to enter the changing area.

"—Mononobe Yuu, are you there?"
I heard Lisa's voice coming from the door. Tia frantically covered her mouth and Firill held her breath.
"Y-Yeah, I'm here."
I feigned calmness and answered. I was already bracing myself for this kind of situation. She was absolutely not going to let me off so easily.
"I can't find Tia-san and Firill-san... They are not together with you, are they?"
However, I still broke out in cold sweat with fright when I heard that question. Lisa looked like she was here in search of them. Since she had not discovered their clothing in the changing area, Firill had most likely hidden Tia's clothing and hers.
"H-How could that be possible... Those two won't come here, right?"
With the determination to flee the bathroom immediately as soon as Lisa left, I lied.
"True. Sorry for disturbing you."
Saying that, Lisa moved away from the door. I sighed in relief but Lisa did not exit the changing area.
Next, I heard the rustling of clothing. I suddenly had a bad premonition.
"U-Umm... As a special reward for how hard you've worked, only for today, allow me to scrub your back. Also, it is more efficient for two people to bathe together—"
Saying the same thing as Firill, Lisa entered the bathroom with a blush. The towel covering her body seemed a bit small, exposing everything below her chest and abdomen.
Well aware of that herself, she stretched the towel, trying her hardest to cover the majority of her body.
However, she paused as soon as she saw Tia and Firill together with me in the bath, swallowing the rest of her sentence.
Finally, as shame turned into anger, Lisa's face also flushed red.
"What is this!? Aren't Tia-san and Firill-san right here!?"
"No, it's because—"
Having lied, all explanations were rendered weak and ineffectual. However, Firill stared at Lisa and said:
"But... Lisa, you wanted to take a bath with Mononobe-kun too, so you can't scold us for that, right?"
"W-Well... No, I was simply concerned—"
"Stop looking for excuses, Lisa, and come on in. We can probably fit another person."
Firill waved and enticed Lisa with the bathtub.
"That way, it'll be more efficient!"
Smiling, Tia repeated what Lisa said just now.
"B-But..."
Lisa's gaze wandered in hesitation. Firill hugged my shoulders at once.
"If you don't come, Lisa, I'll have Mononobe-kun all to myself."

"Muguu... Enough, Firill, this is a bit uncomfortable."
Sandwiched between me and Firill, Tia complained with a smile. Attacked by the softness of the two girls, my sanity was slipping away. No, perhaps I had simply soaked too long in the bath.
"H-Hold on, Firill, know some shame! Arghhh, goodness gracious, get away from him right this instant!"
Lisa was already blushing to her ears. She immediately walked over and stepped into the tub, trying to pull us apart.
I could not tear my gaze from Lisa's thigh.
"M-Mononobe Yuu, what are you staring at!?"
Lisa frantically tugged at a corner of her towel, but this brought down the top end, displaying her deep cleavage before my eyes.
"S-Sorry..."
I frantically turned my head away but was met with the sight of the blushing Firill and Tia, making me unsure where to look. Since my legs were pinned down, I could not stand up either.
Just as I was in a dilemma and the situation was going out of control, I heard frantic footsteps.
"What is the meaning of this!?"
Someone rushed into the changing area directly and pulled the bathroom door open in one go.
Showing up fully clothed, Mitsuki's expression was grim.
A dark smile surfaced on her face while she looked alternately between Tia, Firill, me, and Lisa who had one foot in the tub.
"M-Mitsuki-san, umm, this is a misunderstanding—I came to caution them against..."
Lisa explained in panic but confronted with Mitsuki's cold stare, she lost the power to argue.
"...Mitsuki, come in and join us?"
Firill asked weakly but Mitsuki glared at her and shut her up.
"Mitsuki... So scary."
Intimidated by Mitsuki's aura, Tia submerged half her face.
"Wondering why it was so noisy, I came to have a look... But never did I expect even Lisa..."
Mitsuki sighed with her hand against her forehead.
"Mitsuki, what's wrong?"
Then Ariella and the others appeared as well.
"Wawa... Mononobe, what are you doing!?"
Leaning out from behind Mitsuki, Iris went red in the face and asked.
"Hwah... Onii-chan?"
Going red, Ren hid behind Ariella.
Seeing everyone's reactions, Mitsuki glared sharply at me.
"So... Nii-san, there is a mountain of things I wish to say, but before that—"
"W-What is it?"
I gulped and asked. Mitsuki roared in anger:

"How much longer do you intend to expose your naked body to everyone!?"
"S-Sorry! I'll get dressed immediately!"
I instantly lifted Tia and stood up, trying to leave the tub.
But without considering the consequences of this action, I fully exposed my lower body that had been hidden underwater.
"Ah."
It was too late for regrets.
All eyes were focused on one point. Next, seven people's worth of screaming ensued.

Part 4

On the second floor of the Mononobe home, my room was adjacent to Mitsuki's.
There was a lot of shounen manga on the bookshelves. A satchel with back straps was still hanging on an elementary schooler's desk. The school calendar on the desk still showed March from three years ago. It looked like NIFL had taken me before my elementary school graduation. I felt like I was recalling someone else's memories.
To me, having lost all memories beyond three years ago, this room felt like it belonged to someone else.
I apparently liked soccer at the time. The posters on the walls were all soccer players.
Resting against the futon, I looked at the posters, sighing deeply.
I was not simply sighing due to the loss of my memories. I also felt extremely exhausted because of the long lecture Mitsuki delivered after the bathroom crisis.
Moreover, Iris had witnessed the scene. Judging from how she screamed and ran away, tonight's conversation might be very difficult.
Iris was in Mitsuki's room while our rooms were adjacent and very close together. However, after that lecturing, I really did not have the courage to visit Mitsuki's room again.
Unable to calm my feelings, I stood up and walked to the window. Pulling the curtains open, I could see a bit of light in the opposite house.
Over there was where Mitsuki lived before becoming my sister. It was currently Ariella and Ren's bedroom. The light I could currently see was probably used for illumination.
—At this distance, it was definitely possible to converse with the windows opened.
As soon as I thought about how Mitsuki and I used to have happy conversations like this, my heart began to ache intensely.
At this moment, the room's sliding door shook then came slightly ajar.
"Mononobe... Can I come in?"
I could see Iris' face from the gap in the door.
I walked over in surprise and opened the door. Dressed in a negligee, Iris fidgeted shyly. She looked like she was still bothered by what had happened in the bathroom.
"You came, Iris. But... won't Mitsuki get mad?"

To prevent us from violating public morals in the house, Mitsuki had warned ahead of time. If she discovered Iris came to my room, Mitsuki would probably get angry again.
However, Iris smiled wryly without panicking.
"Don't worry, Mitsuki-chan tired herself out scolding all of you. She is already asleep."
"Really... Then let's talk now."
Feeling guilty for exhausting Mitsuki, I invited Iris into the room.
"Wow... It's like a kid's bedroom."
Iris looked around in interest then sat down on the futon.
"I actually was a kid when I lived here. By the way, why are you sitting there?"
"Eh, I can't?"
Iris tilted her head in puzzlement. Dressed in a negligee, sitting on the futon, there seemed to be an element of seduction. However, Iris had no self-awareness of that sort.
"It's not that you can't... Whatever, let's proceed."
I calmed down and faced Iris who was sitting on the futon.
"Is this a very important topic?"
Iris confirmed with a serious look on her face.
"Yes."
I nodded and took a deep breath. Although it was decided abruptly, I already prepared myself. Although it was very troubling, I already fully understood the existence of "myself."
"Actually, Tia told me, she'll return my memories to me."
"Eh...?"
Iris was stunned for a moment then spoke in surprise:
"S-So you're saying Tia-chan can return your memories to the way they were, Mononobe!?"
"Wait, not so loud."
I frantically covered Iris' lips. I carefully observed the presence next door. It looked like the noise had not woken Mitsuki.
"S-Sorry. But... That's wonderful, Mononobe. That's truly wonderful..."
Large teardrops fell from Iris' eyes while she gave me her blessing in a trembling voice.
It looked like in her consideration for me, she had not realized she might lose her "number one" position in my heart.
Thus, even if I told her what troubled me, she would surely ask me to retrieve my memories.
Through just now, I had already confirmed this fact.
Hence, I needed to steel my own determination even more.
"Thank you for being happy for me, Iris. But to be frank, I'm very afraid."
"Afraid?"
"How my current self will change, how my feelings for you, Iris, will change... I might get overwritten by my past self, it makes me very afraid."

Iris was instantly stunned by what I said.
"That's true... I know how you feel, Mononobe. Still... But—"
Iris placed her hand on her chest and looked at me with a pained expression.
"—I know. Even so, I must retrieve my memories."
"Mm-hmm... I think that's best. Because you look like you've been suffering the whole time, Mononobe... Poor Mitsuki-chan, kept in the dark all along."
For the second time, Iris showed relief for others without being concerned for herself.
"It's not an issue between Mitsuki and me. In my current state, I can't face you, Iris... So, I have to move forward and retrieve my past self."
Iris had always worried about Mitsuki. Influenced by the real "Mononobe Yuu," I also felt guilty, unable to grow closer with Iris. Due to this indecisive state, I could only maintain a relationship of ambiguous affection with Tia and the others.
As a result, no one was going to obtain happiness if the status quo continued.
"Mononobe..."
"I will definitely become different from my current self—Neither will I forget anything, including you, Iris... I won't forget my current feelings for you."
"Yeah..."
Iris brushed the corner of her eye with a finger then replied in a sobbing voice.
"Hey Mononobe, will you promise me a willful request, just one?"
"What is it?"
Enduring the pain in my heart, I asked. No matter what it was, I would do everything I could to actualize it.
"In the end... I'd like to have a date with the current Mononobe, just the two of us."
Smiling tearfully, Iris told me her wish.
"It's a promise."
I instantly replied. Iris smiled happily.
"Thank you. It's already late tonight, so how about tomorrow morning?"
"No problem."
"Then let's wake up earlier tomorrow morning."
Saying that, Iris stood up then left my room lightly.
Leaving only traces of tears...

Part 5

The next morning, Iris and I were walking side by side in town with morning mist hanging in the air.
The sun had just risen and the air was still a bit chilly.
It was very quiet in the surroundings. Sounds of car engines and birds singing could be heard clearly.
"Looks like we ran away successfully without anyone discovering."
"By the way, I can't believe you managed to get up so early. Mitsuki would have woken if you used an alarm clock..."
Roused by Iris before 5am, I rubbed my sleepy eyes and commented.
I never expected Iris, who often overslept at school, to get up this early.
"Oh, umm, well—Yeah..."
Iris answered vaguely. On closer examination, her eyes were a bit red.
"Hmm? No way—You didn't sleep?"
"Rather than didn't sleep, it's more like I couldn't sleep... B-But don't worry, I already slept in the van yesterday!!"
Seeing Iris smile bravely, I could not say anything. It would be insensitive to say I was tired despite sleeping so soundly.
"Oh, Mononobe! It's really fine, don't worry. Come on, gimme a smile, it's a rare date after all."
Seeing my expression, Iris spoke cheerfully and held my hand. I was startled by the strength coming from her delicate fingers and smiled back at her. Yeah, Iris would be sad if I made a gloomy face.
"You're right. We should enjoy our date right now."
I gripped Iris' hand in return and looked around.
Slightly farther away from the residential neighborhood was the entrance to the arcade shopping street.
We naturally walked over there.
The shops were not open at this time with only one delivery vehicle stopped there and no one could be seen behind it.
"But is this kind of date okay? There are no shops open right now..."
Would Iris be happy like this? I asked her.
"Don't worry, I'm happy with just taking a walk, because I'm with you, Mononobe. Do you feel bored together with me?"
"No, of course not."
"Then that's enough. This is our date, Mononobe."
Iris smiled happily and we walked arm in arm.

Although this made it harder to walk, compared to before, it gave me a stronger sense of Iris' presence.
Indeed, nothing else would be needed.
Arm in arm, Iris and I walked along the street. Without any memories, I could not introduce things to her. I even had to take care not to get lost.
Hence, we made one round then returned to the vicinity of my house.
The date would be over if we went home just like that. We stopped in front of a park on the side of the road and looked at each other.
—We wanted to stay together longer.
After confirming these feelings, we entered the park.
This was a small park with leisure facilities for small children. At this hour, it was completely deserted.
Maintaining this posture, arm in arm, we sat down on a bench, looking at this park we had all to ourselves.
"We have to get back before the others wake up.
Iris said sadly.
"Not really, it's fine even if this date continued for the entire day. Since we're on vacation, it's fine even if we don't stay in touch. Oh well, although we'll face all kinds of questioning afterwards."
I squinted at the morning sun and answered.
Despite making such a suggestion, I still felt very scared. Perhaps I still wanted to remain with Iris like this indefinitely.
If possible, I wanted time to stop at this moment. It was very spineless, but these were my true feelings.
"Thank you, Mononobe, but... No. We can't worry Mitsuki-chan."
Iris shook her head resolutely. Instead of choosing to escape, she was going to, with determination—
"Iris..."
She was very resilient indeed, always guiding me on the important points.
"Also, no matter how much time we have, the final farewell will always be painful."
Iris smiled dreamily and looked into my eyes.
She was like me... No, she was even more afraid than me, but she did not escape.
"That's why, here—Let's end it here. It's fine to end it like this..."
Saying that, she closed her eyes and lifted her face.
—Such frustration.
Why was I so weak?
As least right now, I needed to become as strong as her.
"Got it..."
Answering briefly, I drew near Iris' face.
Mustering my maximum courage, I slowly approached the end.
My distance between Iris shortened bit by bit. Finally, all I could see was her.
Then we made contact.

Soft, warm, slightly moistened lips.
This was the third and perhaps our last kiss.
In order not to forget this moment, Iris and I kissed for a long time
But ultimately, the end had to come. Iris slowly drew away and ended the kiss quite calmly.
While I was still in a daze...
"Then let's go back," Iris used a cheerful voice to remind me.
With blushing cheeks, she forlornly released my arm and stood up.
I wanted to pull her back and embrace her tightly but that would waste her resolve.
Clenching my fist, I resisted the urge and stood up from the bench.
At this moment, I noticed.
Mitsuki was standing at the park entrance, staring at Iris and me in a shocked expression.
"Wha—"
I exclaimed in surprise. Why was Mitsuki here... No, this park was near the house.
Probably noticing Iris and I had gone out after she woke up, Mitsuki must have gone searching for us.
But this really was the worst timing.
"Ah..."
Meeting my gaze, Mitsuki cried out and took a step back.
But for a moment, I could not move, unable to even call her.
Then Iris ran over.
"Mitsuki-chan!!"
She simply hugged Mitsuki who was trying to flee.
"U-Unhand me! Sorry—for intruding upon you. I had no intention of peeking —"
"No! This is the end! Mononobe has always wanted to turn back into the Mononobe who loves you most! So—Don't run away!"
Iris spoke to Mitsuki in a strong tone of voice.
After hearing this, Mitsuki stopped struggling as hard.
"The end? Turn back... What on earth is this about—"
With a troubled expression, Mitsuki asked Iris.
"Everything, all of it will be explained. Sorry, Mitsuki-chan. What happened just now was my willfulness."
Iris hugged Mitsuki tightly, her shoulders kept shaking.
Mitsuki gradually calmed down and looked in my direction.
"Nii-san..."
After taking a deep breath to calm myself, I walked over to Mitsuki's side.
By this point, there was no way to hide things. But the situation had changed. Thanks to Tia, I was now able to recover my memories.
Furthermore, I had already resolved myself to turn back into Mononobe Yuu. Even if the truth was brought to light, Mitsuki would not despair.
"Mitsuki, you probably noticed I've been hiding some things from you."

I tried my hardest to stay calm and confirmed with Mitsuki.
When I revealed that Yggdrasil was taking over my mind, Mitsuki had asked whether I was still hiding more things.
"Indeed, Nii-san, last time you said that you would tell me once you have retrieved everything."
Troubled, Mitsuki nodded and looked at me.
"Yeah... Although it's a bit early, I'll tell you now."
Resolving myself that there was no turning back, I explained everything to Mitsuki.

Part 6

"Wait here for me. I'll go call Tia-chan."
Iris left Mitsuki and I in front of the entrance and went into Mitsuki's old home.
Tia was probably sleeping on the second floor with Lisa. Iris was fetching her to recover my memories.
Having listened to the whole story at the park, Mitsuki now stared in shock at the sky.
"...Seriously, I never would have thought."
Mitsuki whispered.
"Something like losing your memories in exchange to download new data of anti-dragon armaments... Unable to recall living in this town... That kind of thing, even if you tell me—"
Saying that, Mitsuki gnashed her teeth and glared at me sharply.
"Also, even saying immediately that there was no problem because you were going to retrieve your memories immediately—How am I supposed to react? Be sad? Be happy? ...I do not even know what expression to use to face the matter."
Smiling in self-mockery, Mitsuki kicked a pebble by her foot. The rolling pebbled stopped after hitting my shoe.
"I am sorry, Mitsuki."
"What in particular are you apologizing for?"
"For lying to you, Mitsuki... Pretending to be your brother as 'Mononobe Yuu' when I clearly have no memories."
Hearing that, Mitsuki sighed deeply.
"Lying—is definitely not good, but there is no need to feel bothered about pretending to be my brother."
"Huh?"
"Do you think I would fail to notice if someone were to pretend to be my brother? Even having lost your memories, Nii-san, you are still yourself. I still know that, at least."
Mitsuki stared at me with forceful eyes. Then her expression grew gentler.
"So... Whether 'the memories will come back so it is fine' or 'Nii-san will turn back into his original self'... Even if you tell me something like that, none of that would excite me. Moreover, I somehow get the feeling that something larger is brewing... But there is no telling what it might be... What should I do? My thoughts are all knotted together."

In our dialogue, Mitsuki voiced how lost she felt. I did not know how to answer either, hence silence descended upon us again.
Evidently, even after confessing my secret and sharing information, I still could not reach an understanding with Mitsuki.
I was unsure what exactly Mitsuki wanted to express.
"Nii-san... You and Iris-san were kissing, right?"
"Y-Yeah."
Surprised, I nodded.
"Iris-san said it was the end and that once your memories recovered, you would turn back into the Nii-san who loves me most. However... What grounds is that belief founded upon?"
"Well..."
All I could think of was the childhood promise Mitsuki had mentioned after the Basilisk battle.
"Getting married after reaching adulthood. That was what you and I promised, right?"
Mitsuki asked as though reading my mind.
"...That's right."
It was pointless to deny it—I had no choice but to admit.
"Iris-san is nice to a fault."
Mitsuki smiled wryly and spoke softly.
"Ahhh—I still do not get it. Should I be happy? Should I be sad...? Or should I be angry...? Everything is incomprehensible... Everything is—"
Saying that, Mitsuki looked down.
The atmosphere grew heavy again. Thus, after time passed without us saying a word, the main door opened with a clatter.
As though trying to escape the awkward atmosphere, Mitsuki and I both looked at the door. We happened to make contact with Iris who was peering out. We all smiled wryly.
"M-Mononobe... Sorry, the others found out."
In addition to the apologetic Iris and Tia, four more people came out together. Lisa, Firill, Ariella and Ren.
"Ahhh..."
I rested my forehead against my palm in despair. On further thought, asking Iris to bring just Tia out alone was too tall a task. It was unavoidable that the others would discover her.
"So, what are you trying to do? Please explain properly."
Arm crossed, Lisa questioned. Once again, Iris and I explained the situation to everyone.

"More secrets. Give me a break. Even I'm getting mad now, you know?"
"...I'm already mad, and it seems like we're the only ones kept out of the loop."
After learning the whole story, Ariella and Firill stared at me.

To prevent the commotion from attracting my parents' attention, we went over to the earlier park.
Choosing a park over indoors was due to Tia's request. A park where trees grew would apparently allow Yggdrasil to manage the plant network.
"Well, you two should calm down first. Since the memories can be recovered, we should hurry and attempt it. It would not be too late to save the complaints for later."
"Yes, Onii-chan's memories are the most important."
Already in the know, Lisa and Ren began to appease Ariella and Firill.
"That's right, we must not delay any longer. Tia-chan, please. Return Mononobe's memories."
Iris urged Tia seriously.
"Got it..."
Still looking a little sleepy, Tia rubbed her eyes and shook her head to wake herself up.
"Nii-san, is this really for the best?"
Mitsuki asked me sorrowfully.
"Yeah."
I nodded and Mitsuki looked at Iris.
"Mitsuki-chan, I've always been waiting for this moment to arrive."
Iris noticed Mitsuki's gaze and responded with a cheerful smile. It was a smile of resilience without a shred of hypocrisy.
Mitsuki looked like she wanted to say something but her lips moved without making a sound.
"Okay, Yuu, Tia will try hard too."
Under everyone's watch, Tia stood before me.
"What do I need to do?"
"Umm... Basically, Tia will access Yuu's brain next, rather than skin... lips would be better."
For some reason, Tia's face turned bright red while she spoke quietly.
"Sorry, I didn't quite catch that. What kind of contact?"
"Umm... W-Well... A-Anyway—Get down first!"
Saying that, Tia pulled my hand. I had no choice but to listen to her and stoop.
"U-Uh... This isn't a wedding vow kiss yet, okay?"
"Huh?"
Tiny cherry lips drew near and pressed against my lips.
Wha—
Due to this sudden attack, my thoughts halted. With shocked faces, the others watched Tia kissing me like this.
"Mmm..."
Tia kissed more forcefully and stuck her tongue inside my mouth. The instant the tip of Tia's hot tongue made contact with my tongue, there was a pop in my mind as though sparks had exploded.

Presumably, electrical access to the brain was established through a passage via oral mucous membranes.
By the time I became aware of the significance of what she had said earlier, Tia had already separated from me.
"Yuu, how do you feel?"
Blushing, Tia asked gently.
"Eh? How should I say this? Umm, my brain feels lighter—"
I answered in confusion. If it was over like this, that would be far too simple a process.
No, perhaps startled by Tia's kiss, I had failed to notice great changes.
I originally expected myself to be replaced by the real "Mononobe Yuu" but there was no special feeling.
"Tia has cleared away the bad stuff Yggdrasil sent into your body. Now you should become able to recall past memories."
"Become able to recall, past memories...? Not return to the way I was?"
"No, Yuu's memories were blocked. After clearing them, you'll naturally be able to remember bit by bit."
In other words, I would not feel a dramatic change in memory right now. I looked at everyone else, stunned as they were, my gaze settling on Mitsuki.
"Ah..."
Past experiences flashed in my mind, but those memories were too vague. I could not even tell when they had occurred. However, the image of Mitsuki's face, from when we were playing in this park, overlapped with her current face.
"N-Nii-san?"
Mitsuki called my name in concern.
By the time I noticed, my cheeks were burning and a single tear was sliding down from my eye.
"Sorry, although I'm not recalling everything, there are vague impressions, the memories are still there, they still remain... At the thought of this, I..."
I frantically wiped the corner of my eye and smiled at the worried Mitsuki.
Seeing me like that, Mitsuki wept with joy.
"Really...? I'm so glad, Mononobe, honestly, I'm so glad."
Seeing Iris crying with a smile, the others seemed to recover their from the shock.
"But Mononobe-kun cannot recall clearly... Is that a problem?"
Firill asked with worry.
"No, it isn't, Firill-san. I believe it is very normal for memories to be difficult to recall clearly. Memories are very ambiguous to begin with, especially those that have not been recalled for a long time. They probably entered a state that is relatively harder to recall."
Arms crossed, Lisa contemplated while offering her insight.
"Then let's take a walk all over town and check out the scenery, how's that? It might jog his memory. After all, this is his hometown."
Ren nodded to agree with Ariella's suggestion.

"That's a great idea."
"Then today, let's all have a tour of Mononobe's hometown."
Iris concurred happily. It looked like she was happy for real. However, as soon as I thought of Iris' last kiss with me, I knew she was pushing herself.
My heart was aching. My feelings for Iris had not disappeared. But while my memories slowly returned, these feelings might no longer remain "number one."
When my thoughts reached this point, I noticed that like me, Mitsuki was paying attention to Iris.
"Mitsuki..."
Seeing the slight expression of suffering from the side of her face, I spoke to her hesitantly. Then Mitsuki smiled wryly at me and said:
"As expected, I still have no idea how to react. Nii-san... Are you happy?"
"Well..."
I was at a loss for words. Seeing me like that, Mitsuki sighed.
"Well, no matter what, you ought to thank Tia-san. Nii-san, for your sake, she... even kissed you."
Mitsuki urged me with complicated expression that seemed a little angry and slightly appalled.
"Yuu..."
Tia looked at me with slight worry. She probably felt worried after seeing I was unable to answer Mitsuki's question immediately. Seeing as I was the one who hoped for this outcome, it would be bad if I did nothing to ease the worry on Tia's face.
"Tia, thank you for returning my memories to me."
Placing my hand on her head with the little horns, I stroked along her hair's direction.
"Yeah... But speak up if you feel anything weird. Tia still isn't familiar with using Yggdrasil's power—"
At this moment, Tia stopped mid-sentence and widened her eyes, staring over my shoulder.
"Tia?"
Just as I inquired, the surrounding suddenly darkened.
The trees in the park were shaking. A strong gust of wind swirled.
"What is going on!?"
I followed Tia's gaze to look at the sky too.
Floating in the sky... was a gigantic monster.
Large enough to blot the sky, its wings featured hard jet-black scales. Tiny black particles were flying around it.
—I had seen it before.
It was the giant dragon that I had seen many times during lectures at Midgard, capable of creating dark matter and the perpetrator of the first dragon disaster.
"'Black' Vritra..."
By my side, Mitsuki spoke its name in surprise.

Occupying Nanato City's airspace, the black dragon was ruling the sky with overwhelming presence.
A majestic sight truly befitting the title of dragon. To believe that having defeated Yggdrasil and retrieved my memories, all problems were resolved... That was an illusion.
Nothing was over.
The dragon possessing the same power as Ds was watching us from high in the sky...

Chapter 2 - Boy Meets Girl at Dusk

Part 1

Two hours before "Black" Vritra appeared at Nanato City, a flash of blinding light at the mountains at the prefecture of Tochigi blasted away all darkness prior to dawn.
It was a huge explosion capable of blowing a mountain away and flattening a forest.
In search of Jeanne Hortensia's whereabouts, Kili witnessed the explosion while hovering in the air ten-odd kilometers away.
Kili had found John's clues while tracking down the trail of destruction originating from the Asgard lab. This explosion had also occurred along that trail if one extrapolated forwards.
"Although there's no telling whether it's related to Jeanne-chan... I guess I have to take a look. By the way... Why am I trying so hard to find her?"
Kili grumbled while flying towards the blast origin.
Using transmutation to create flames for propulsion, Kili easily arrived on scene.
Inside a hole resembling a gigantic crater that had been blasted out from the mountains and forest, a strange object was moving.
"What is that...?"
It resembled a wriggling mass of flowing silver.
It was difficult to articulate its appearance. Also, it seemed to be sliding on the ground instead of walking. Roughly the size of a human. Relatively elongated in shape, it was dragging its lower body on the ground like an evening gown.
In addition, what appeared to be silver threads were extending from the edge of the body. The silver body was probably composed from a mass of such silver threads.
Furthermore, the silver threads were suspending a restrained girl in midair.
"That girl, how did things turn out like this?"
Kili remarked sardonically.
The girl captured by the silver threads was precisely whom Kili was looking for—Jeanne Hortensia. Probably unconscious, she did not appear to be moving. It was also possible she had died. After exchanging glances with the unidentified monster, Kili sighed deeply.
She had no obligation to rescue Jeanne. They simply had aligned interests.
"Argh, jeez!"

However, for some reason, there seemed to be an inseverable bond between them.
Deploying the invisible Muspelheim around herself, Kili descended.
Although she posed the question to herself, the answer was known long ago.
Because she had nothing.
Born out of nothingness, her life had been very hollow. Hence, she treasured her bonds with others even more. She seemed to recall this feeling in the past.
"Somehow it feels like... the time when I met Yuu three years ago."
Walking straight to Jeanne, Kili smiled wryly.
The instant the monster noticed Kili, it twisted its silver threads together to stab like in the form of a spear.
Kili transmuted her surrounding dark matter in an attempt to vaporize the monster's attack. Due to the high temperature, even her view of the scenery began to shimmer.
"What!?"
But instantly, Kili felt an impact on her abdomen accompanied by a wave of sharp pain.
The silver spear easily penetrated the flame barrier, grazing her flank. Had Kili not dodged, she would most likely have been skewered.
"Gaho... Kuh—"
While enduring the dizziness caused by the pain, Kili healed the wound using transmutation.
Capable of surviving Muspelheim which could melt even bullets... Could it be mithril? Then this monster was...
The instant Kili realized the monster's identity, a purple light flashed from the gaps between the silver threads—

Part 2

"Black" Vritra had appeared in the sky over Nanato City.
The screeching noise of cars braking to a halt tore through the tranquility of the early morning.
Frightened birds flew away from trees.
The screams of people witnessing Vitra could be heard all around.
"All units, deploy fictional armaments! Battle stations!!"
Just as we were standing in shock from Vritra suddenly blotting the sky, Mitsuki issued commands to us in a forceful tone of voice.
"—Gungnir!"
Lisa was the first to construct her fictional armament of a spear. The rest of us then sprang into action.
Fictional armament—Siegfried.
I aimed my fictional armament of a gun at Vritra in the air.
At this moment, my view of Vritra's figure in front of the muzzle suddenly turned hazy while the dragon's overall body gradually dissociated into black particles in the air.
Vritra's form began to disintegrate, turning into something like a black cloud.
"Wha..."
While we were baffled by what was happening, the black particles—most likely Vritra's dark matter—began to fall from the sky.
In the middle of falling like torrential rain, the dark matter changed trajectory unnaturally.
"It's coming this way...!"
Firill yelled loudly then raised her book-shaped fictional armament. A gust of wind blew, isolating us from the surrounding noise. A barrier of wind had been formed.
The dark matter, about to flood us, descended in the center of the park—in the sandpit—and gathered at one point.
"Didn't Vritra become Yggdrasil's seedbed? Kili definitely said that..."
Ariella stepped forward to protect us, constructing her gauntlet-style fictional armament.
Kili had mentioned that Yggdrasil's rapid growth at Fuji's Sea of Trees required a large energy source, so it had stolen Vritra's dark matter. Was that speculation wrong?
"...We half-wrecked Yggdrasil's main body, so that could be the reason."

I looked at the current owner of Yggdrasil's core—Tia—but she shook her head.
"No, it's definitely because Tia cannot control Yggdrasil completely. Although Tia has become Yggdrasil's core, Tia is still maintaining sense of self... So the captured Vritra seized the chance to escape."
"Eh!? So Vritra is here for revenge?"
Iris asked frantically.
"Well... Dunno. But Tia will definitely protect Yuu and everyone."
An electrical current sparked between her pair of red horns.
Capable of using electricity to interfere with dark matter, Yggdrasil was essentially Vritra's natural predator.
However, just as she mentioned, Tia had not accepted Yggdrasil's power completely.
The outcome of a direct battle was completely impossible to predict.
Resembling a black cloud, Vritra gradually landed, contracting into a sphere in the middle of the park. It was most likely the dark matter forming Vritra's body.
We nervously clutched the fictional armaments in our hands.
Ripples appeared on the black sphere's surface, then a pale and slender arm extended out from inside.
"Wha..."
Mitsuki exclaimed in surprise and watched the scene in shock.
A girl with gorgeous black hair had appeared from inside the dark matter. As she slowly stepped out, the dark matter also formed a black one-piece dress to envelop her.
"Kili...?"
We could not help but utter that name, because the girl's face resembled Kili too much. However, she looked younger than Kili, probably about the same age as Tia.
Vritra's figure in the sky had vanished completely. The dark matter in the sandpit also dissipated.
Hence, a girl greatly resembling Kili had shown up.
What exactly did this imply?
Smiling, the girl said something, but due to the wind barrier, we did not hear anything.
Then she impatiently waved her right hand to generate dark matter even bigger than herself. The instant the dark matter popped like a bubble, all the trees in the park shook violently.
A strong gust of wind blew. At the same time, we started hearing sounds from the surroundings.
"The wind... cancelled each other?"
Firill said quietly in surprise.
After getting rid of the annoying wind barrier, the girl smiled contentedly and said:
"I am Vritra. New core of Yggdrasil, I wish for a word with thee."

Ignoring us, she looked straight at Tia.
Sure enough—It was as expected.
Despite her human appearance, that was undoubtedly Vritra.
Calling Tia the core of Yggdrasil, she waited for Tia's answer.
"...A word?"
Tia took a step forward and replied to the girl—Vritra.
"Indeed, I have no intention of fighting, because 'tis clear to me that the situation doth not favor me. Neither do I wish to repeat past mistakes. Hence, the only option is to talk. Thus, I have taken the same form as thee."
Vritra raised her slender arm and looked at it while speaking.
This body was most likely created from dark matter. A materialized body, although it was unclear whether it was similar in nature to fictional armament like creating Hekatonkheir... It looked like she had turned into a girl's form to talk with Tia.
"Tia doesn't wanna fight either..."
"A wise decision, new administrator of the Akashic Record. Since the previous core consciousness was driven by an overly aggressive survival strategy, there was no room for negotiations. 'Tis gratifying that thou art not so rigid."
Vritra breathed a sigh of relief.
Twenty-five years ago, Vritra presumably vanished to hide from Yggdrasil. It looked like Vritra had suffered much at the hands of Yggdrasil.
Although I felt a bit of sympathy while looking at Vritra's form of a young girl, I instantly calmed myself.
Vritra was the evil dragon that had spread calamity all over the world. After disappearing, it had also used its fictional armament, Hekatonkheir, to spread calamity further.
The culprit who had trampled my hometown in the past was this Vritra right before my eyes.
Currently, it had its eyes on Tia the whole time. Surely, human existence did not register in its eyes. Stepping on humans would be like trampling ants.
Sirens could be heard from afar. The town was already in chaos.
"—Vritra, let's go somewhere else if you want to talk."
I mustered my determination and spoke to Vritra.
Probably witnessing the black particles gathering in this direction, townsfolk and the police were hurrying over here. We had to hurry and leave.
"...'Tis the third time encountering thee."
Those black eyes carried hostility while Vritra stared at me and spoke.
"Third time?"

"Irregular existence, destroying my Hekatonkheir twice as Yggdrasil's puppet... I shan't forget the pain when thou usedst blue flames to wound me."
Yggdrasil's puppet... Indeed, that was true now that I thought about it. A proxy war had been fought between Vritra and Yggdrasil, with the former using Kili and Hekatonkheir while the latter was using me.
However, I did not know Vritra and Yggdrasil's motives.
"Didn't you cause humans a lot of suffering too? If there's a grudge, it goes both ways. Anyway, more people will be coming if we stay here. Let's get moving."
Looking at her, I urged. Vritra pouted unhappily.
"I care not about humans. I shall sweep them away if they bother me. Stop interfering, irregular. Although my daughter holdeth thee in high regard, thou art nothing more than the likes of an error or a bug to me. I shall eliminate thee if thou darest to obstruct my discussion with the core consciousness."
"Daughter? You mean Kili?"
Vritra ignored my question and exuded intense killing intent.
"No!"
But Tia spread her arms and blocked in front of me.
"If you attack Yuu or hurt others, Tia will be angry! Then Tia won't talk to you!"
"Hmm..."
With Tia in heightened state of emotion, sparks flew all around.
Seeing Tia standing sternly, Vritra sighed deeply.
"—No helping it. I shall listen to thee. If there is an appropriate place to talk, please lead the way."
Vritra spoke to me reluctantly.
"Got it. Come this way."
Relieved, I walked to the park entrance.
"Hey Mononobe, where are we going?"
Beside me, Iris asked discreetly.
"Mitsuki's house. Then Father and Mother won't see us and we won't need to worry about getting disturbed."
Along the way from the park to Mitsuki's house, we saw many people looking up into the sky.
However, the gigantic dragon from earlier had disappeared, so many people remained skeptical. Most likely, direct witnesses of Vritra were still a minority.
While hoping for the commotion to die down like this, we brought Vritra the culprit to Mitsuki's house.
Looking like a younger Kili, Vritra looked at the town's scenery in boredom.

Part 3

"Please have a seat."
"—Hmm."
Taking the cushion Mitsuki handed to her, Vritra sat down on the carpeted floor.
We were in the master bedroom at Mitsuki's house, in other words, the room where Tia, Lisa and Firill had spent the night.
This place was relatively spacious and tidy, suitable for us to talk.
"Nice to meet you."
Sitting on a cushion too, Tia bowed at Vritra.
Mitsuki and the rest of the girls sat on the bed while I leaned against the doorway.
Having recovered my memories, this place really felt a bit nostalgic when I look at it.
Especially the corridor and the stairs, I could already superimpose them with childhood memories. I had probably visited this house often in the past.
If I focused on recalling, I would probably remember more, but right now, I had to stay vigilant of Vritra's movements.
Hence, I changed my mindset and looked at the two girls sitting face to face, staring at each other seriously.
"Despite the extra people present... No matter, cut straight to the chase, shall we? I wish to reach an agreement of cooperation and understanding, to work with thee henceforth."
"Cooperation?"
Tia cocked her head and repeated in puzzlement.
"Indeed. Despite some priority issues in resolving matters... Our objectives are fundamentally the same. Since there are flaws in both sides' plans, 'twould be wise for us to aid each other."
Vritra spoke fervently but Tia touched her own face in confusion.
"Umm... Sorry. Tia doesn't even know what the plan and objective are."
"What...? Art thou not Yggdrasil's core? Why wouldst thou not know?"
Vritra asked Tia in astonishment.
It looked like Vritra recognized Tia entirely as Yggdrasil but that was mistaken. So-called Yggdrasil was a global-scale network formed from plants

The current Tia had only acquired the power to control Yggradasil without merging her consciousness with all plants. To maintain her ego—to remain human—she had not chosen assimilation.
In other words, Tia did not share all of Yggdrasil's knowledge.
"Because Tia is not used to it and the strain is too much, Tia keeps connection to Akashic Record at a minimum. It looks like the sync rate with Yggdrasil needs to increase in order to understand what you're talking about."
After hearing Tia's reply, Vritra said impatiently:
"Then I demand that thou informest thyself of the situation right now."
"Right now... Not possible. Tia will stop being Tia unless adjustments are performed gradually over time."
"...How much time?"
"No matter how rushed, probably at least a day..."
Vritra made a bitter expression after listening to Tia. Although I did not want to interrupt the discussion, I could no longer stay silent.
"If you can't wait for Tia to become fully prepared, why don't you just explain your objective here and now?"
"Foolish. What I desire is to speak with Yggdrasil. Even if ye were told the objective, 'tis impossible to continue the discussion unless the core consciousness is connected to Yggdrasil."
Vritra glared at me then with a look of resignation, said:
"...Since time needst to be taken, I shall wait until then."
"Thanks!"
Tia breathed a sigh of relief and thanked her.
The discussion ended for now and the atmosphere eased up slightly. Then Iris timidly raised her hand to speak.
"Uh... Then there are no plans for today, right?"
"Well, I suppose so."
Lisa nodded with an expression that seemed to say: Then what?
"Then to jog Mononobe's memory, let's tour the town as originally planned? Vritra-chan should come along too!"
"...Vritra-chan?"
Vritra frowned with surprise surfacing on her face. It was most likely the first time someone called her that. It was the same for Kili, who felt troubled when called "Kili-chan." It felt like their reactions were very similar.
"You usually use that gigantic form, right? In that case, you've never had a good look at a human town before, right?"
"This is my first time to create a human stand-in and 'tis true that I have never observed human settlements in detail, because no such necessity existeth."
"Surely there are things you don't understand if all you do is look down from above. So come with us and tour the town where Mononobe lived."

Iris invited Vritra with a serious expression. This was not meddling on a whim. Iris probably wanted Vritra, who kept causing dragon disasters incessantly, to see what so-called "humans" were.
"Come on, Vritra-chan."
Iris took Vritra's hand without hesitation.
Her strong determination could be seen through her action.
Iris had lost her parents in a dragon disaster caused by Leviathan. Then in order to fight against that type of unreasonable tyranny, she had come to Midgard.
Hence, this was surely a kind of a fight for her.
More than anyone present, Iris believed that Vritra must not be left alone.
"...A human town mattereth not. Why must I look at that sort of—"
"Mononobe made the deal with Yggdrasil for the sake of protecting this town, did you know? Although I dunno what your plan was, Vritra-chan... Don't you wanna have a look at the town that stopped your plan?"
Although Vritra's response was not promising, Iris still asked with greater emphasis in tone.
"Thou sayst this town is the the cause of my plan's failure?"
"Yes, it's because Hekatonkheir attacked this town that Mononobe needed power. Vritra-chan, you were controlling Hekatonkheir, right?"
"Indeed, 'twas the stand-in I created to take action without Yggdrasil's interference."
Vritra confirmed Iris' question.
"Then if you had ordered Hekatonkheir to go somewhere else back then, Mitsuki-chan wouldn't have gone to Midgard... Then the Kraken might not have been defeated. I think this town isn't so insignificant that you can describe it as something that matters not."
Iris was talking about possibilities. Indeed, she was right.
Thinking back, it was for Mitsuki's sake that I wanted to save this town.
That was why I still chose to fight even after she told me to escape.
Eh—Who actually told me to escape...?
Feeling a contradiction in my memories, I tilted my head in puzzlement. On that day, before the news and the sirens alerted the populace to evacuate, I apparently knew that Hekatonkheir was coming to attack. Existing at the bottom of my memories was that knowledge.
Were my memories a little confused...?
Holding my forehead, I shook my head.
"—Amusing, that seemeth to be more interesting than sitting around to wait. I shall come along as a means to kill time."
Vritra accepted Iris' suggestion and agreed to come sightseeing with us.
"Thank you, Vritra-chan."
Iris thanked her happily.
"T-There won't be a problem, right...?"
Watching developments quietly, Firill remarked in worry.

"Since Tia is present, she probably won't do anything rash, but... Iris really acts boldly sometimes."
"Mm."
Impressed, Ariella commented and Ren agreed.
"Suddenly told about Nii-san's memories... Then no sooner had Tia-san recovered Nii-san's memories, Vritra appeared... And now, we are going for a stroll in town next. Seriously, my mind is in total chaos."
Mitsuki sighed with an exhausted expression.
One could hardly blame her for feeling overwhelmed by the situation coming to this without giving her any time to settle her emotions.
"Mitsuki, sorry for making trouble. Let's have a good talk afterwards."
"Oh... Yes."
Mitsuki showed surprise then nodded in response to what I said. Then she blushed.
"What's wrong?"
"Nothing. It is because your tone of voice when speaking to me just now, Nii-san... was just like how you were in the past."
Despite looking happy, Mitsuki continued to stare at Iris with guilt.
Thus, under this slightly tense atmosphere, we decided to go out to town with Vritra.

Part 4

"Although there was a dragon disaster alert, the dragon has apparently left?"
"It was more like it disappeared rather than left. Although the alert is still in effect, it should be fine. The office is still opening as usual. I confirmed with the office and they said I'm expected at work."
Mother and Father were chatting while watching the morning news. Shown on the screen were images of Vritra taken by ordinary townsfolk.
Vritra arriving in the sky over Nanato City had become big news, but since there was no actual damage and the brevity of the appearance, rumors were beginning to circulate that it might have been a prank.
Already accustomed to dragon disasters, people did not panic. Life continued as usual in the town. Three years ago, the approaching Hekatonkheir had suddenly vanished. Perhaps due to that kind of precedent, my parents could react in such a laid back manner.
And the Vritra in question was currently eating at our dining table.
Since it would be worrying to leave her alone in Mitsuki's home, we brought her along, saying she was a classmate who arrived late.
"How does it taste? Is it good?"
Seeing Vritra, unused to chopsticks, eating fried eggs and wieners, Iris inquired.
"...This taste doth allow pleasure to be derived from food indeed."
Vritra answered without stopping. Meaning it tasted good, probably.
Things would probably calm down as long as she stayed like this without making a scene.
After breakfast, Father left for work. We departed shortly after that.
"Take care. You're not coming back for lunch, are you?"
"No, I think we will be returning in the evening. See you later."
Following Mitsuki's response, the rest of us said "see you later" to my mother. At the entrance, Ohagi the black cat also went "meow" as though seeing us off.
—Speaking of which, Mitsuki said that Ohagi was picked up by me.
Although this part of my memories was still very hazy, I was probably going to recall it soon.
Led by Mitsuki, we walked along the road with Vritra. There were several helicopters flying around in the sky, possibly belonging to NIFL and the news media.

"Then where are you going next?"
Amidst the propeller noise, Lisa asked. Mitsuki looked back and replied:
"One by one in order, I would like to visit locations with shared memories between Nii-san and me. First, I will take everyone to the shopping street."
Passing by the earlier park, we arrived at the entrance to the shopping street. During my date with Iris, none of the shops were open but by now, many had raised their metal shutters and opened for business. There were also a lot of pedestrians. After the disturbance this morning, schools were probably suspended. I did not see any students on their way to school.
"We mostly shopped at this shopping street. Nii-san, do you recall how we used to help Mother buy things here?"
Pointing at the grocery store and the supermarket, Mitsuki asked me.
"...Yeah. Mother even told us we could buy whatever we wanted with the change. We agonized over what to buy and got scolded for coming home late."
As though floating to the surface from the bottom of my memories, another memory awakened.
"Fufu, something like that did happen. I remember then... I think we bought an ice cream and shared it between us... Now that I think back about it, I cannot believe we did something so embarrassing."
Perhaps remembering what happened at the time, Mitsuki blushed. After listening to her, Iris seemed to have gotten a good idea, so she raised her hand and suggested:
"Mitsuki-chan, let's try doing the same thing. Perhaps that might help Mononobe to remember more."
"Ehhh!? T-That kind of thing now—"
Mitsuki frantically refused but Iris kept encouraging her.
"Don't be like that. Try harder because this is for Mononobe! And I'd like Vritra to try ice cream too."
Iris looked back and waved to Vritra who was trailing at the end in boredom.
"...Ice cream?"
Vritra walked over to Iris while frowning.
"Yeah, it's cold and sweet!"
"I am one who resideth in a higher dimension. I was given no choice but to partake in thy meal earlier. Fundamentally, I need not ingest the same food that ye humans eat."
"Rather than for nutrition, ice cream is something you eat because it's yummy. We just had breakfast too, so we're not hungry, but desserts go in a separate stomach!"
Saying that, Iris held Vritra's hand without reservation.
"...Incomprehensible."
Vritra frowned but did not resist in particular.
"Come, Mitsuki-chan, take us to where they sell the ice cream."
Iris pushed Mitsuki on the back to hurry her.

"—I understand. This way please."
Mitsuki sighed in apparent resignation then started to walk.
"Iris seems especially lively today. She looks even happier than Yuu about the recovery of his memories."
Looking at Iris, Tia commented.
"...Yeah."
I concurred but in my view, Iris seemed to be putting on a brave smile.
"—We have arrived."
Mitsuki stopped somewhere soon after entering the shopping street.
"Eh... This place sells ice cream?"
Making a surprised look, Ariella checked with Mitsuki. It was only normal for her to feel doubt, because the sign read takoyaki shop.
"Yes, this takoyaki shop sold ice cream as well since a long time ago. See, it is on the menu."
Saying that, Mitsuki pointed at the menu in front of the shop. Indeed, it included items such as ice cream, shaved ice and drinks.
"Now that you mention it... We used to buy snacks at this shop once in a while."
The memories naturally flashed through my mind. On the way home from elementary school, Mitsuki and I would pool our pocket money together to buy ice cream or takoyaki while being careful of the gazes of friends and other students.
"Every time we were found out, Father and Mother scolded us."
Mitsuki answered happily in excitement, but in contrast, Firill and Lisa showed stiff expressions.
"...This so-called *tako*... Wouldn't happen to be the octopus, would it?"
"I fear that... it refers to the devil fish. Takoyaki... I really don't feel that it's edible."
The culture of their homelands probably did not have the custom of eating octopus. With gazes of revulsion, Lisa and Firill stared at the takoyaki sign.
"Don't be so biased if you've never eaten it. I've had takoyaki before and it's quite tasty."
Having lived with Ren in Japan before, Ariella advised the two girls.
"Even if it's tasty, asking me to eat something like that is a bit..."
"I honestly cannot stand an octopus' appearance. Those squirming tentacles... I don't even dare imagine the sight."
Ariella laughed after listening to Firill and Lisa.
"Don't worry, the appearance is totally non-threatening. So, Mononobe-kun, you guys get the ice cream and the rest of us will have takoyaki."
"Mm."
"Tia wanna have takoyaki too."
Ren nodded and Tia raised her hand in agreement.
"Ehhhh!?"
Ignoring Lisa and Firill's wail, Ariella ordered takoyaki and ice cream.

Thus, Mitsuki and I shared one ice cream while Iris and Vritra shared the other one. Ariella bought a box of takoyaki for herself and the rest of the girls, the five of them. Sitting down on the bench in front of the shop, we began to eat.
"Nii-san... Are you sure about eating this with me?"
Holding the ice cream cone, Mitsuki confirmed with a blush.
"If you're uncomfortable with eating it together, Mitsuki, you can have it all."
"N-No, it is not that I dislike it. As long as you are willing, I am fine with sharing it."
"It does feel a bit embarrassing... But to us, sharing one serving of food happened all the time."
I scratched my head and answered. Mitsuki went "ah" quietly.
"What's wrong?"
"...Nothing. Then please go first, Nii-san."
Blushing, Mitsuki extended the ice cream to me.
"Thanks."
I licked the front of the ice cream with my tongue. A cold and sweet taste. Ice cream should taste the same no matter where you eat it, but perhaps because of the location and the mood, this felt a bit nostalgic to me.
"Then I shall start too."
Mitsuki licked the opposite side, restoring balance to the tilting ice cream. Seeing us like that, Iris smiled contentedly.
"Is it good, Mononobe and Mitsuki?"
"I-It's good."
"...Yes."
We nodded stiffly. Having confirmed that, Iris presented her ice cream to Vritra.
"I'm so glad. Come, Vritra-chan, please enjoy!"
"Hmm..."
Despite much hesitation, Vritra extended her tiny tongue and licked the white ice cream.
"This is—"
Vritra widened her eyes in surprise. Iris asked her encouragingly:
"How is it? It's really yummy, right!?"
"...A human's gustatory perception is more sensitive than imagined. 'Tis a different experience compared to breakfast. I can understand why ye humans are so concerned with flavor."
"Uh... So basically, you mean it tastes good, right?"
Iris confirmed with Vritra, who had used difficult words in her answer. The black dragon in human form avoided eye contact.
"I affirm that pleasure is derived from flavor and texture. However, 'tis without value to me."
"Why?"

Looking like she disagreed, Iris asked. Hence, Vritra generated dark matter on her palm without saying a word. The dark matter's outline twisted and transformed into an ice cream.
"Wow... Amazing, I can't believe you made food..."
Iris exclaimed in surprise. Since cooking in most cases involved multiple ingredients of plant and animal matter, using dark matter to make this kind of food would be the same as entering the realm of biogenic transmutation. Even though they were capable of creating salt or sugar on their own, ordinary Ds could not accomplish this feat of transmuting food. Kili was probably the only D who could. Nothing less expected from Vritra, but—
"I can create anything by myself. Hence, thy favorite food is completely worthless to me."
Vritra spoke with apparent disinterest then licked the ice cream she had made. However, she frowned.
"...What's wrong? The taste is different from what you thought, right?"
This possibility occurred to me, so I asked.
"Apparently a mistake in proportions. Minute differences, probably... I never expected such a dramatic change in flavor."
Vritra stared at the ice cream in astonishment. Hearing her say that, I smiled wryly. Evidently, Vritra was not omnipotent.
"Given this example, you'd better not brag you can create anything. No, I should say that even you can't perform perfect biogenic transmutation either."
I tried to bait her to answer. Recalling what Vritra had done so far, this possibility was quite likely.
"What?"
Vritra frowned. I shrugged at her.
"You tried to offer Tia to Basilisk before and tampered with Kili's dragon mark to make her Hraesvelgr's mate. But if you've got complete control over biogenic transmutation, you would've created Ds as mates directly in the first place."
Thinking back to Hekatonkheir attacking Midgard and Kili's dragon mark changing color, I continued:
"You didn't because such precise tuning is very difficult, right? Just like this ice cream here."
"....."
Vritra remained silent unhappily, proving the correctness of my hunch.
"Even the matter of creating life is quite suspicious too. Is Kili really a human you created out of dark matter?"
If life could be created, there should be others the same as Kili, right? Following this line of thinking, I asked Vritra.
"—She is my daughter."
Vritra replied curtly as though avoiding a direct answer. Perhaps I had touched a sore spot. Vritra glared at me with eyes of fury.

"Mononobe, Vritra-chan, let's save such a hard subject for later. Look, the ice cream's gonna melt if you don't finish it quick."
Just as the smell of gunpowder had crept into the mood, Iris hastily intervened. Just as she had pointed out, the ice cream was melting.
"Hmm."
Suddenly snapping out of it, Vritra licked the original ice cream. Indeed, she liked the taste very much.
"So Mitsuki, we'd better hurry before the ice cream melts completely."
"Y-Yes."
Mitsuki nodded and we licked the ice cream alternatively. But the more we ate, the more necessary it became for us to lick the same spots.
My heart naturally began to pound as I saw Mitsuki licking the trails left on the ice cream by my tongue. Probably aware of the indirect kissing, Mitsuki had blushing cheeks and moved quite stiffly.
My emotions were about to go out of control. To calm myself down, I shifted my gaze to Lisa and the other girls.
"—Look, it doesn't look like octopus at all. It's very good, so try it."
Using a toothpick to eat the freshly made takoyaki, Ariella encouraged the indecisive Lisa and Firill.
"It's really yummy! Not a lie!"
"Mm."
Tia and Ren were also eating takoyaki and concurred with Ariella.
"...Fine. By this point, I cannot escape anymore."
Perhaps having readied her resolve, Lisa stabbed a takoyaki with a toothpick and brought it to her lips in trepidation. Firill gulped and quietly watched her.
"—Hmm."
Lisa took a bite of the takoyaki. Although it seemed quite hot, she still chewed.

"H-How is it?"
"The outside is grilled to perfection, the inside is fluffy and sticky... The filling is chewy with quite a novel texture, the flavor is... not bad too."
After listening to Lisa's comments, Firill also brought a takoyaki to her mouth.
"Ah... It's true, it's unexpectedly delicious and the filling's texture is definitely interesting."
"And that's precisely the octopus. See, wouldn't it be a shame if you missed out because of prejudice?"
Ariella spoke proudly. Lisa and Firill nodded in agreement with complicated expressions.
"Yes, you make a fair point... But even so, I have no wish to eat any other octopus cuisine."
"Me too."
Firill concurred with Lisa but after noticing my gaze, she turned to face me.
"Oh... Mononobe-kun, do you like octopus?"
"Hmm? I don't hate it."
"I see... Then I have to work hard to stop finding octopus disgusting."
Overturning her earlier decision, Firill clenched her fist and declared.
"Hold on, Firill-san, you are selling out too easily."
Lisa sighed in exasperation. Watching the scene, I could not help but smile wryly. Mitsuki patted me on the shoulder.
"Nii-san, it will melt if you do not hurry. You can finish the rest."
"S-Sure."
Since melted ice cream had begun to flow onto my hand, I popped the ice cream into my mouth together with the cone.
"The one called Iris, thou shalt have this."
Vritra shoved the poor tasting self-made ice cream to Iris and silently resumed eating the original ice cream—

After finishing the ice cream and the takoyaki, we began to visit places with memories one after another.
There was the old shrine where we went for the New Year's first shrine visit and summer festival, the hobby store where Mitsuki and I would pool our New Year's money together to buy games, the bookstore we frequented in the past, the elementary school where we studied at the time—
Although the commotion caused by Vritra's appearance had caused schools to shut down temporarily, the shopping street was in business as usual.
After having lunch at a family restaurant offering set menu items, we took a bus to the observation platform on the mountain.
"—How are you, Yuu? Are you recalling more things?"
While feeling the rocking of the bus, I looked at the scenery outside the window. Sitting in the back, Tia asked me.
"Yeah... I recall many memories at every place Mitsuki brings us to. But—"

Despite nodding, my voice showed reservation.
"But what?"
Sitting next to me, Mitsuki urged me to finish what I was going to say.
I felt a bit hesitant, unsure whether I should say it, but after deciding hiding things from Mitsuki again would be bad, I spoke up:
"What revived are almost all memories between me and Mitsuki. In the beginning, I didn't find anything strange about that, but when we visited the elementary school, I still could not recall much except things related to Mitsuki. I clearly should have close friends but I can't recall the names and faces of them."
"That's... surely because memories with stronger impressions get recovered first. Don't be so impatient. Tia doesn't think there's a problem."
Tia encouraged me cheerfully but I felt unable to nod in agreement, because this was not my first time experiencing the anxiety of being unable to recall anything apart from memories related to Mitsuki.
"...I hope so. It somehow feels more like the time after my first deal with Yggdrasil."
"The first deal—You mean the fight against Hekatonkheir at this town?"
Mitsuki asked in confirmation. Perhaps reacting to the mention of Hekatonkheir, Vritra glanced in our direction from her seat farther away.
"Yeah. I made a total of three deals. The first time, all memories unrelated to Mitsuki became fuzzy. The second time, I forgot about Mitsuki before she became part of the family. The third time, I lost all memories earlier than three years ago. Right now, my condition is the closest to the way I was after the first deal. Maybe recovering this much is already the limit—"
"It's not like that!"
Sitting in front, Iris immediately leaned forward in my direction and said.
"I-Iris?"
"Mononobe, aren't your memories just starting to recover? You should be able to remember everything if you try hard enough! The observation platform we're visiting next is a very special place, right?"
Iris confirmed with Mitsuki, because before taking the bus, Mitsuki had already explained to the whole group the reason for going out of our way to visit the observation platform so far away.
"Yes, that observation platform is an extremely important place to Nii-san and me. It is also the place where we faced off against Hekatonkheir three years ago."
Mitsuki spoke nostalgically. Listening to her, Iris clenched her fist.
"Since it's a place like that, you'll definitely remember more of the past! You mustn't give up, Mononobe!"
"...Yeah."
Overwhelmed by Iris' vigor, I nodded. After listening to her, I felt more optimistic for some reason.
Thus, the bus took fifteen minutes to reach the station near the observation platform. Fresher air filled my lungs as soon as I got off the bus. A small

stream ran beside the bus stop sign, most likely the source of the river running through the center of town.
"There is an observation platform after a short walk from here. Let us go, everyone."
Mitsuki began along the path to the observation platform.
The sloped path was quite gentle. Even a child would not find the journey too hard.
Before Mitsuki became my sister, we apparently ascended this sloped path together with each other's family. Although fragments of memories were surfacing, I could not recall what Mitsuki's parents looked like.
Just as I thought, what flashed through my mind were memories related to Mitsuki.
'Yuu-kun, wait up!'
'You're too slow, Mitsuki!'
I heard voices from our younger selves.
—Leaving our parents behind, Mitsuki and I had run up this sloped path.
'Yuu-kun, don't leave me behind!'
I originally expected Mitsuki to run out of breath halfway, but she desperately followed me to the very end.
I remembered that time—
While I was reminiscing, we arrived at the observation platform. Although the journey felt like it should have been longer, that was probably because I was still a child back then.
"The view becomes wide open all at once."
Looking at the view of Nanato City in the distance, Lisa remarked.
"...Although I sweated a lot, the breeze is very comfortable here."
Fanning the front of her uniform, Firill was enjoying the mountain breeze.
"There's no one else apart from us. After that kind of commotion this morning, I guess that's only natural."
Looking at the deserted observation platform, Ariella murmurred.
"No, this place was rarely visited to begin with. It feels pretty much like this all the time."
While feeling the surfacing memories, I replied to Ariella. Listening to me on the side, Mitsuki agreed.
"—That is because there is nothing else to see. I heard that this observation platform was remodeled from the remains of a past castle. Remnants of the castle walls remain over there too."
"Huh!? Castle walls?"
However, Lisa reacted with sensitive hearing.
"...I'd like a look too. I'm interested in Japanese castles."
"Tia too!"
Firill also expressed interest and Tia concurred.
Scant remnants of the castle walls were located on the edges of the observation platform with a sign board erected on the side to introduce the

historical ruins. After Lisa and Firill went over, Ariella also invited Ren to go.
"Ren, let's go have a look."
"Mm."
Once they departed, only Mitsuki, Iris and Vritra were left by my side.
"Oh, Vritra-chan, there's a telescope over there. Let's have a look."
Iris suddenly showed an expression as though she realized something. Speaking loudly on purpose, she took Vritra's hand.
"I have no interest in that sort of—"
"There there."
Iris forcibly dragged Vritra away. She probably wanted Mitsuki and I to spend time alone together.
"Iris-san..."
With a complicated expression, Mitsuki watched Iris leave, but as soon as she noticed my gaze, she smiled, somewhat troubled.
"Nii-san, given this rare chance, let us look for our houses like we did in the past."
"—Yeah, I remember there's the shopping street's arcade for a landmark."
I accepted Mitsuki's suggestion. Leaning with my hands on the railing, I looked at the scenery afar. Compared to Tokyo, this place was a countryside town without neither towering buildings nor special characteristics. But if I shifted my gaze to areas even farther away, I did not even see any towns.
"...There hasn't been much progress in the reconstruction of neighboring towns."
Three years ago, Hekatonkheir had already wrought plenty of destruction before arriving at our town. Mitsuki and I had witnessed the neighboring town getting trampled by its gigantic feet. The signs of destruction from that time were still clear to see even now.
"Since damage was not limited to just the neighboring towns, I suppose they could not spare the limited manpower."
Mitsuki held down her hair that was billowing in the wind, answering in calm tone of voice.
The one who controlled Hekatonkheir was "Black" Vritra. Using her own word, it was her stand-in.
Stand-in—Normally speaking, this Shinto term referred to "a substitute for a god or spirit to possess."
In other words, whether that blue giant or the current human appearance, both were essentially the same to Vritra.
A vessel created for the main body's consciousness to reside, a materialized physical body.
The girl looking through the telescope with Iris some distance away was the perpetrator responsible for this scenery of carnage.
However, she did not feel responsible. Asking her to atone was probably impossible. Confronted with something whose value system was incompatible with ours, what kind of relationship should we build with her?

Besides, what kind of existence was Vritra's main body? And where was it?
"Nii-san, your brow is all knitted together. Have you forgotten we are trying to find our houses?"
Perhaps noticing my thoughts had gone on a tangent, Mitsuki looked up at my face and asked.
"Oh right, uh..."
I referenced my memories while looking for the arcade serving as the landmark, but unable to orient myself, I failed to find it. Seeing me like that, Mitsuki pointed with her finger and said:
"Look, the shopping street is over there. You can see the reflecting sunlight."
"...Oh, so it's over there. Considering the river's position, our home is—That side."
I finally found the shopping street then deduced my home's location from the relative position.
"Fufu, Nii-san, you used to be the one who told me the shopping street's location, you know? Now the situation has reversed."
"...Yeah."
Her words caused my memories from that time to revive vividly.
"Do you recall—our promise?"
Mitsuki asked me slightly nervously. Without needing me to focus, the memories at the time replayed in my mind.

'What a surprise... The buildings became so small.'
My younger self looked at the scenery over the railing and exclaimed in joy.
'Can you see our homes?'
Showing excitement in her eyes, the young Mitsuki searched for our home.
'Should be around there, right? See, that's the arcade in the shopping street.'
'Eh... Where? I can't see it!'
Leaning against her shoulder, I pointed into the distance. Mitsuki and I carved the sight of our town into our hearts and retinas.
Mitsuki looked like she was in a good mood. The young me asked her if something good happened.
"Yeah, because I kept up with Yuu-kun today! You usually leave me behind all the time, don't you know that hurts my feelings?"
'That's because you're too slow.'
'I'm not slow. I finally caught up today. From now on, we'll stay together forever and ever!'
Saying that, Mitsuki hugged my arm.
'D-Don't do that, it's very stuffy. What do you mean, stay together forever and ever? That's impossible!'
'Why is it impossible? As long as we get married, even if we turn into old people, we'll still be together forever!'

Mitsuki replied with an innocent smile.
'What are you talking about? Don't you know kids can't get married?'
'I know, that's why I'll settle for being a fiancee until we become adults.'
Hearing her declare so openly, I was stunned with surprise. At this time, Mitsuki silently drew her face near.
Then—

'This is the kiss of engagement, Yuu-kun.'
Recalling the soft sensation of her lips, I felt blood rushing to my face.
"Oh, Nii-san... You are going red. Looks like you remember. That is a relief to me."
Mitsuki blushed shyly and smiled.
"It was before we became siblings..."
"Yes. Back then, I had already decided to marry you, Nii-san. To prevent you from getting stolen by someone else, I did everything I could despite being a child."
Mitsuki spoke in what sounded like a joking tone of voice, but her face was shrouded in gloom.
"Neighbors since birth, going to the same kindergarten and elementary school, with strong ties between our families—Back then, I believed that if we grew up together like that, we would eventually get married. Until that accident happened..."
Mitsuki's words drew out more of my memories. Memories I had instinctively avoided recalling. Memories tinged with pain and sorrow.
The screeching sound of brakes could be heard from the past, then an impact that seemed to turn the world over.
In that very instant, Mitsuki and my future was twisted dramatically.
Back then, I even did not understand what had happened.
While I was on a camping trip with Mitsuki's family, the car was driving along a mountain path with excellent visibility. Mitsuki and I were chatting excitedly in the back seats. We never expected to be deprived of our happy times henceforth.
It was apparently an accident.
An accident where two died and two survived with light injuries.
The deceased were Mitsuki's parents whereas Mitsuki and I were the lightly injured ones.
We survived thanks to awakening our power to generate dark matter.
Indeed—Mitsuki and I had become Ds after that accident.
"After my parents passed away, the future envisaged in my dream was destroyed as a result, my D powers also awakened... I was uncertain what lay in store for the future... Just then, Nii-san, your parents offered to adopt me as their *daughter*, but—"
Looking out at Nanato City's scenery, Mitsuki gripped the railing hard.
Right now, I could definitely remember what happened back then.

'Listen carefully, Yuu. Now that Mitsuki-chan is alone, we have to become her family. I hope you'll be Mitsuki-chan's older brother, Yuu.'
—On the day of the funeral, Father said that to me in our backyard.
To be honest, I had no idea how much of what Father said I understood at the time. I think I would feel confused—Whether becoming family or an older brother, were such things that simple?
However, I could not leave Mitsuki all alone. That one point was extremely clear.
Hence, I nodded and promised Father.
Nevertheless, Mitsuki reacted in surprising manner at the time.
Evidently recalling what happened then, Mitsuki smiled wryly.
"To me, those words robbed me of my last hope, robbing me of the future where I could be married to you. Unable to control my feelings, I burst out crying and ran away from home... I think I must have said many mean things to you when you came chasing after me."
Mitsuki asked me if I still remembered.
"...Yeah, I remember now."
Reviving in my mind was the sound of Mitsuki screaming as hard as she could.
'Yuu-kun, you understand nothing! Nothing at all... because—'
The young Mitsuki was voicing her feelings while crying. Quietly, I hugged her. I could clearly remember the sensation of her small and trembling shoulders, as well as the cold feeling from clothing wet from her tears.
"Nii-san, you took on all of my uncertainty and emotions. You said that no one knows about us becoming Ds so things were fine as long as we kept the secret. Because we are not blood-related, we could marry even after becoming siblings... Every word you said reassured me."
"That's right... It was there that we made a promise."
I felt furious that I had forgotten something so important. Even if Yggdrasil was responsible, this was clearly the one memory I absolutely must defend —
'Don't worry, Mitsuki. Even after becoming siblings, I will also always love you more than anyone else. Let's get married when we grow up.'
My younger self definitely made this vow.
"Please do not look so troubled. It was indeed a very precious promise to me, but even so—It was nothing more than a verbal agreement between children."
Pressing her hand against my cheek, Mitsuki smiled faintly at me.
"Love? Marriage? You probably did not fully understand at the time, Nii-san, so... Just as I mentioned before, I have no intention of binding you to this promise, Nii-san."
"But Mitsuki, you were serious, right? Starting then, you already..."
"...Because I was a precocious girl."
Mitsuki smiled wryly and withdrew her hand. Then she looked at Vritra who was together with Iris.

"Nii-san, you made three deals with Yggrasil, losing memories every time, is that correct?"
"Y-Yeah."
It troubled me to hear her suddenly change the subject.
"On which occasion did you forget about the marriage promise?"
Looking at Iris, Mitsuki asked solemnly.
"I think it's either the first or the second..."
"Please state clearly which time it was. This is extremely important."
"Probably... the second. When I downloaded weapons data in order to defeat Leviathan, I think."
After the first deal, I still remembered everything so long as it was related to Mitsuki. Forgetting the important promise with Mitsuki probably happened after the Leviathan battle.
But why was she asking about this? I looked at Mitsuki, only to see her gazing at Iris afar while she spoke:
"Then Nii-san, allow me to ask you: When did you fall in love with Iris-san? After the Leviathan battle? Or... before?"
Then Mitsuki turned her gaze back and looked squarely at me while she posed her question.
My heart was pounding harder and harder.
Mitsuki was asking whether I started falling for Iris before I forget the promise. I always believed that I fell in love with Iris because I had forgotten my promise with Mitsuki... But now that I think back about it, the timing seemed ambiguous.
After the Leviathan battle, Iris kissed me with gratitude as the stated reason. It was starting then that I became intensely aware of Iris, but if one were to ask whether I had started falling for her before that? I could not answer immediately.
Seeing me at a loss for words, Mitsuki smiled wryly.
"—Since you are unable to answer, Nii-san, allow me to change the question. Right now, Nii-san... Do you love me?"
The instant she asked that question, all the accumulated memories and emotions surged from the depths of my heart.
"That goes without saying."
This time, I could answer immediately, but Mitsuki gave a deep sigh.
"However... That is surely love as family... Right?"
"Huh?"
"Nii-san, you probably experienced romantic love for the first time... only after encountering Iris-san. I know that you hold me very dear, Nii-san, but please do not use our promise as a reason to cover up your true feelings."
"Hold on, I—"
I wanted to stop Mitsuki from drawing conclusions on her own, but she ignored me and continued:

"Memories are simply a record of the past. I believe you should follow your feelings and pursue a future shared with Iris-san, Nii-san. That would be the right thing to do instead."
Saying that, Mitsuki grabbed my hand and walked over to Iris and Vritra.
"M-Mitsuki!"
Dragged forcibly, I protested but Mitsuki did not stop.
"...Mitsuki-chan?"
Originally talking to Vritra, Iris noticed us approaching.
"Iris-san. We have finished talking. I am returning Nii-san to you now."
Mitsuki released my hand and pushed me towards Iris.
"Eh? Returning Mononobe to me... What do you mean by that?"
Iris asked Mitsuki in surprise.
"—The one Nii-san loves is you, Iris-san, so do not worry about me. Please find happiness together with Nii-san."
"Eh...? W-Why is this happening!? The one Mononobe loves the most is you, Mitsuki-chan! That's why I—"
Iris answered frantically. Unable to understand their dialogue, Vritra stared at me incredulously.
"You are mistaken. Nii-san's heart... belongs to you, Iris-san. I know this very well."
"No! Mononobe cherishes you more than anyone. I've been watching Mononobe the whole time, so I know!"
While listening to Iris, Mitsuki turned slightly stiff.
"...I have watched Nii-san far longer, much longer than you have, Iris-san. On matters regarding Nii-san, my correctness is absolute."
"It's true that my time with Mononobe is shorter than yours, Mitsuki-chan... But I watched him agonize over his memories from the closest position possible. You don't know the current Mononobe as well as I do, Mitsuki-chan!"
In response to Mitsuki, Iris argued without backing down.
"What... Nothing of that sort! I know Nii-san's matters best! That is why I know that Nii-san ought to be with you, Iris-san!"
"Wrong, you don't know Mononobe. Mitsuki-chan, you totally don't understand how much Mononobe loves you!"
Mitsuki and Iris glared at each other.
"H-Hey—"
Although I knew I should stop them, doing that meant I must first come to a conclusion. After the recovery of my memories, my feelings for Mitsuki became very strong, but at the same time, my feelings for Iris still remained in my heart. There was nowhere enough time for me to weigh these feelings against each other.
"Nii-san, stop spacing out. Please kiss Iris-san right now. That way, I can give up."
Saying that, Mitsuki pushed me towards Iris. With our bodies pressed together, Iris blushed.

"Wawa!? Mononobe, no! If you want to kiss, you should kiss Mitsuki-chan!"
Despite her panic, Iris still pushed me towards Mitsuki. This time, I was put in pose as though embracing Mitsuki. Her cheeks went red.
"N-Nii-san, what are you doing!? You are embracing the wrong person!"
I was pushed towards Iris again, but of course, Iris pushed back.
"What exactly are ye doing…?"
Vritra looked at me in exasperation while I was being pushed on both sides by the two girls.
It was then when Lisa and the others returned from checking out the castle walls.
"What is the situation here?"
Lisa asked with a troubled expression.
"Tia knows! This is definitely the game of 'Oshikura Manjuu'! Tia wants to play too!"
For some reason, Tia joined in with the pushing. Perhaps it was something she picked up from a book.
"Ah, so it's that exercise… Let me play too."
Firill expressed interest but Ariella stopped her.
"No, I don't think so. Right, Ren?"
"Mm… It's not. Oshikura Manjuu is an exercise you do in cold weather."
Ren nodded and agreed with Ariella.
Seeing everyone's eyes on them, Mitsuki and Iris stopped pushing and looked each other in the face.
"…Iris-san, let us have a good talk about this later."
"Yeah… I know."
Despite glaring at each other, the two girls separated from me.
"Eh? It's over already?"
Pushing my abdomen nonstop, Tia cocked her head in puzzlement.
I stroked her head with the horns while observing the situation between Mitsuki and Iris.
The two girls kept their distance and were talking to separate people. Lisa seemed to notice the tension floating between them but she did not look like she was going to say anything.
I turned my gaze to the view of Nanato City's streets and this time, I soon found the arcade at the shopping street.
My memories had definitely recovered.
However, the problems arising from my recovered memories were not that easy to resolve.

Part 5

"Really... So Yuu is at that town..."
Enveloped in flame, Kili Surtr Muspelheim was flying in the sky, murmuring after receiving a report from the Sons of Muspell.
She was carrying an unconscious crossdressing girl in her arms—Jeanne Hortensia.
Jeanne did not have any visible wounds on her, but the one carrying her, Kili, was all covered with injuries.
Her clothing was tattered while blood dripped from her unhealed wounds.
"Ah—"
Losing strength in her fingers, Kili accidentally dropped the cellphone with the call in progress.
Falling down to the vast land beneath the thin clouds, the cellphone gradually vanished as a tiny dot.
"...!"
She did not have the spare energy to chase after the fallen phone.
While using dark matter to perform biogenic transmutation for healing her own wounds, Kili exerted herself to prevent Jeanne from falling.
Both her consciousness and vision were gradually getting blurry.
A moment's carelessness and they were going to crash to the ground.
Biogenic transmutation was definitely not almighty. It required substantial concentration to use and the mind would gradually accumulate strain.
Continual usage would hit a limit sooner or later.
But this was Kili's first time experiencing that limit.
"I can't believe I picked a fight with such a crazy monster..."
Kili laughed in self-mockery and changed her direction.
She headed towards the town where *he*... Mononobe Yuu was right now.
—It's a bit silly to go see him right after parting ways earlier, but it can't be helped.
While she was engaging that thing in a fight, NIFL might have started targeting her.
NIFL had eyes in the sky in the form of satellites.
No matter where she hid herself to rest, she could not rule out the possibility of getting attacked in her sleep.
In that case, finding the most trustworthy party would be the wisest choice.
This most trustworthy party was not the Sons of Muspell but *him* and Midgard. Recalling this fact made Kili smile with self-deprecation.

"Actually... I clearly shouldn't trust them."
Him aside, Kili had no reason to believe in Midgard.
Nevertheless, she inexplicably felt that it was probably fine. Why?
While thinking over these matters, Kili increased her flying speed.
She was having a massive headache.
She had prioritized the transmutation of blood to replace the loss from bleeding, but that further burdened the mind.
Her thoughts were turning sluggish. A strong sense of drowsiness was making her eyelids heavy.
Even so, Kili still flew across the sky, barely managing to reach the town where *he* was.
Within her half-awake consciousness, a past scene surfaced.
It was the memory of her first encounter with *him'.*
Hence, as though drawn by an attractive force—She landed at that place.

Part 6

While we were returning to the shopping street's neighborhood from the observation platform, the sky's color was already turning from blue to red. The bus was very infrequent, so the journey took longer than planned. We were on the way back home, walking along a road on the shore of the river running through the center of town.
"—Yggdrasil, hath thy sharing of information with the Akashic Record not completed yet?"
I was looking out at the river's shimmering surface reflecting the setting sun's rays when Vritra's voice entered my ears. I looked back at the two girls walking at the back.
"Yes, it looks like it'll have to wait till tomorrow."
Tia answered apologetically and Vritra sighed deeply.
"Is waiting very boring?
I slowed down my pace to walk alongside those two, then asked Vritra.
"Yes, today's outing was also very uninteresting."
"...But I saw you enjoying the ice cream quite a lot."
Despite calling it worthless, Vritra still finished the ice cream.
"Well—That was not bad, but the town itself is very uninteresting. With nothing particularly striking, 'tis all too plain."
"Perhaps you're right. And it's not just you. Many humans probably share the same view as you."
I smiled wryly and agreed with her. Vritra looked up at me with a surprised expression.
"Thou admitest 'tis an uninteresting town too?"
"No, people are free to say what they think, but to Mitsuki and me, this is a special place."
I asserted clearly. Listening beside me, Tia nodded in agreement.
"That goes without saying, because there are many important memories!"
"Memories..."
Vritra repeated the word Tia had said. I gasped too, because that was precisely the root issue.
"—That's right. It's special precisely because of intangible memories and human relationships. After getting back a bit of my memories, I can now understand this."
I expressed agreement with Tia then looked at Vritra.

"Dark matter cannot create intangible things, right? In that case, you can't call them worthless from your perspective either, right?"
"Intangible things equate to nothingness, nonexistent things. I cannot see what value they have."
I originally thought Vritra would understand but she refuted me flatly.
"You're so stubborn. Then what about Kili?"
"What?"
"This was brought up before. You did not make copies of Kili. I think something tangible and irreplaceable can be considered special."
"……"
Vritra fell silent after hearing what I said. After a moment's thought, she replied:
"...I concede that she is very useful and replication is difficult, but to me, she is nothing more than something disposable."
Vritra was probably referring to tampering with Kili's dragon mark to turn her into Hraesvelgr's mate. However—
"But it was your failure. It wasn't Kili's fault that Hraesvelgr did not choose her as its mate—I think it was because the modification of the dragon mark was imperfect. This is evidence that you don't have perfect control over biogenic transmutation... Otherwise, there was hesitation in your heart... The reason has to be one of these two."
"Hmm..."
Vritra frowned. Regardless which one, neither was amusing to Vritra. One could hardly blame her for feeling displeased.
"Thou art infuriating. Were it not for Yggdrasil's special warning, I would have obliterated thee."
"Resorting to violence when you're beaten in an argument, that's no good."
Vritra glared at me unhappily but because of her face, she looked very cute.
I could not help but smile wryly.
I stroked her head and tried to soothe her, but she pouted with more apparent displeasure.
When her expression and the view of the river at dusk entered my view, another new memory suddenly surfaced.
'—Please, stop following me.'
Troubled and agitated, a girl's voice sounded in my mind.
It was not Mitsuki's voice. In terms of timber, it resembled Vritra's voice closely.
In the past, at this river, I seemed to have met a girl very similar to her...
The memory of a girl jumping off the bridge flashed in my mind.
That was... Right, the bridge over there.
Ahead of us was a large bridge crossing to the opposite shore. It was where she and I had met.
"How now?"
Seeing me staring at her face, Vritra asked in surprise.
Vritra's face overlapped with the girl in my memory

Indeed, they were very alike.
But I could not possibly have seen Vritra with this appearance in the past.
Speaking of possibilities—
Kili's face came to mind. Although younger in age, Vritra had obviously used Kili's face as a reference.
"Here's a question... Kili was originally your relay for controlling and restoring Hekatonkheir, right?"
I carefully confirmed with her, only to find Vritra show a look of increased incomprehension.
"Indeed that is true... So what?"
"Then Kili and Hekatonkheir visited this town together, right?"
"Yes, that is correct..."
Hearing Vritra's answer, my hunch turned into certainty.
"—Girls, I'm going to make a slight detour."
I called to Mitsuki and the others, then walked to the riverside without waiting for their answer. I would surely remember more clearly if I visited the place where I had met her.
"Mononobe, where are you going!?"
Iris' frantic voice and chasing footsteps could be heard from behind.
I was heading to the spot under the bridge. Walking briskly, I went to the part shaded from the setting sun's bright rays.
—Three years ago, I definitely met Kili.
To obtain definitive proof, I stepped under the bridge. However, what I found there was tangible instead of being memories.
"Huh...?"
In the spot shaded from the setting sun, two people were collapsed.
One was a young man in military uniform with platinum blond hair—John Hortensia.
The other was the girl whom I was just thinking about, Kili Surtr Muspelheim.
John was unconscious while Kili's clothing was tattered and stained with fresh blood. Due to chest movements indicating breathing, I could tell they were not dead. But I could not understand why they were here and in such a state.
Iris and the rest of the girls caught up and exclaimed in surprise like me.
"Why is Kili-chan..."
Perhaps noticing our presence, Kili opened her eyes slightly.
"...Yuu? Ah... I didn't expect to run into you here, now it saves me the effort... of finding you."
Hearing Kili's hoarse voice, I came back to my senses, ran to her side and held her in my arms.
"Hey, are you okay!? What the hell happened—"
"...Don't worry about me. Despite the blood all over me, the wounds are all healed, I am just... a little exhausted."

Kili smiled feebly and tried to sit up but went limp halfway, losing consciousness.
"H-Hey, Kili!"
I called her name but she did not open her eyes this time.
It was troubling to see Kili so weakened for the first time. She said she was exhausted, which implied that she had performed transmutation to her limit. What kind of situation would have made Kili exhaust her powers to such an extent?
"Nii-san, look at Kili-san's right hand!"
Mitsuki cried out, almost screaming.
"Right hand?"
I followed where Mitsuki was pointing at and gasped.
Kili's dragon mark was on the back of her right hand.
The edges of the dragon mark were turning slightly into an ominous purple.

Part 7

"It was originally possible, but the chance slipped away."
Loki Jotunheim commented in a bitter tone of voice while watching the young men carried on stretchers out of a large transport helicopter.
They all belonged to the team under Loki's direct command—Sleipnir.
Although all members had managed to withdraw from the battlefield, they were injured to varying levels without exception.
Purururu—
A call on the cellphone in his chest pocket. Loki took his gaze away from his subordinates who were being transported to NIFL's medical facility and took out the cellphone.
"Hello—Ah, Major-General Dylan. The situation is exactly as indicated by the data I just transmitted, that thing not only defeated Sleipnir but also drove off Kili who had suddenly intervened. Given the ground forces at NIFL's disposal, I believe it is impossible to vanquish by this point."
Loki calmly offered his viewpoint.
"—I understand what you mean. If you insist on attacking using NIFL's power no matter what, how about the anti-dragon ICBM, Gáe Bolg? As long as enough quantity is fired simultaneously to overwhelm interception by antimatter, it might be effective."
Loki grinned slightly as he made this suggestion.
Angry roaring could be heard from the other side of the call.
"...Naturally, I understand this very well too. Due to alleged sightings of Vritra, this country is currently in a state of heightened tension. Putting such an operation into action would mean that we cannot avoid providing information to the Japanese government. Furthermore, though chances of success are merely not zero, one could not call this an effective plan. Suppose you wish to pursue other avenues and keep things discreet, then the only choice is to seek Midgard's assistance."
The other side's answer was a heavy silence. Feeling Major-General Dylan's hesitation, Loki continued:
"Midgard would be equally troubled if Asgard's credibility were to be compromised. Although we will owe them a favor, there won't be any worry about leaks. More importantly, Midgard holds several trump cards capable of defeating it."
After listening to Major-General Dylan, Loki nodded in agreement.

"—Yes, the parents two years ago were defeated by Mononobe Mitsuki's antimatter projectiles. So... Yes, I'm counting on you to negotiate with them."
After the call, Loki exhaled slightly.
Sleipnir's transfer was done. The helicopter prepared to take off.
"—She's not the trump card I had in mind."
Looking up at the aircraft rising in the air with rotating propellers, he muttered to himself:
"If the target were a dragon, just leave it to her. But otherwise..."
At this point, Loki stopped and smiled.
As though looking forward to something, his eyes were glinting with faint light.

Chapter 3 - Newborn Predator

Part 1

Three years ago on that day, I was sitting by the river in a bad mood after an argument with Mitsuki over something trivial.
Grumbling while muttering to myself, I vented my emotions of annoyance while trying hard to calm myself.
My efforts bore fruit. By the time the evening breeze turned cool, my mind was already calm.
"—Please, stop following me."
Just as I was getting up, intending to return home, I heard a girl's voice.
Then a kitten purred and went "meow~", wanting to be doted upon.
I looked up at the river embankment, only to see a young girl walking on the road along the riverside, troubled by a kitten that insisted on following her.
"I only fed you once on a whim just now. There won't be a second time even if you follow me. I can't keep you either."
The girl looked the same age as me. She was talking seriously to the kitten, trying to convince it. She had a well-proportioned face and long black hair. Dressed in a chic and black one-piece dress... She was neither a girl I had met before nor a student at the same school as me.
"You'd better leave this town instead of begging food from me if you want to live. Otherwise—"
The girl continued to persuade the kitten seriously, but she stopped talking as soon as she noticed my gaze.
"...Anyway, don't follow me anymore."
The girl ended her speech halfway and quickly left the kitten. However, the kitten did not learn its lesson and ran after the girl on its short little legs.
I could not help but feel curious, following the girl and the kitten with my gaze. They seemed to be crossing the nearby bridge up ahead. Blocked by the bridge fencing, the kitten was out of sight.
At this moment, a large dump truck sped past along the riverside road. The cloud of black exhaust drifted over, making me cough a few times.
With heavy engine noise, the dump truck turned towards the bridge.
"Ah—"
After that, a small shadow jumped onto the fencing.
It was the kitten from just now.
It was unclear whether it had been frightened by the giant vehicle or it was trying to escape the truck's black emissions—From the riverside, I could not tell.

Having ascended to an unsteady footing, the kitten was apparently blown by the wind caused by the truck's passing. It lost balance and fell into the river.
The instant I saw that happen, I reflexively ran out. But when I ran, I witnessed an even more shocking scene.
As though chasing after the kitten, the girl from just now jumped from the bridge.
"What...!?"
I gasped, only to see a pillar of water rise with a splash. Although the river's surface was wide and the current was gentle, the water was very shallow. Jumping from the bridge and not getting injured was unlikely.
I took off my shoes and entered the river in search of the girl who had sunk into the water.
Immediately, some distance away, the girl stood up with a splash. Despite getting all drenched, she did not look injured. She was holding the kitten against her bosom too.
"Hey, are you okay!?"
I pushed through the water to head over to her. The girl cocked her head in puzzlement.
"...What are you doing?"
"What am I doing...? Well, I saw you fall into the river, so I came to rescue you."
"Really? So you're one of those nice guys."
The girl remarked with disinterest. Then she handed the kitten to me.
"Huh?"
"I'm leaving this cat in your care."
Declaring unilaterally, the girl walked to the shore.
"Hey... How can you decide on your own—"
I frantically called out but the girl simply looked back and said in a calm tone of voice:
"Take the cat and leave this town, because Hekatonkheir is coming tomorrow."
"Huh...? But the news this morning said that according to the current route, this town is safe—"
I asked in confusion but the girl shook her head.
"Human predictions are unreliable. All it takes is a change in a dragon's whims and this town will be destroyed."
"What...? Why do you know something like that?"
"Because—I am a dragon too."
The girl smiled, instantly causing a chill to run along my back and my legs to stiffen and shake nonstop.
While I was unable to move, the girl walked along the riverside and departed. On the other hand, I was standing in daze in the middle of the river, carrying the wet kitten, curled up in my arms—

Part 2

On my back, I felt a weight and feminine softness.
—Three years ago, the girl I met at the river must have been Kili.
Carrying the unconscious Kili while walking, I thought to myself.
Meeting her at Midgard was after my second deal with Yggdrasil. By then, I had already lost all memories related to Kili, which was why I failed to recognize her. Although Kili had used biogenic transmutation in the past to alter her appearance, judging from what happened three years ago, her current face should be her "real appearance." The others were merely disguises, I suppose.
"Mononobe-kun, can you walk a bit slower?"
While I was lost in thought, Ariella, who was carrying John on her back, called out to me.
"Oh, sorry."
I hastily slowed down. Ariella was the most physically fit among the girls but hurrying along while carrying a person on her back was tough work after all.
"Nii-san, there is no need to be so hasty because not many people pass by at this hour."
Mitsuki looked at the surroundings and said to me.
We intended to move Kili and John to Mitsuki's house. Since no one was currently living in Mitsuki's house, it was possible to hide Kili and John and prevent them from getting discovered.
Kili was deemed a disaster by NIFL. Furthermore, John had deserted Sleipnir for some unknown reason and was working with Kili. These two would get arrested immediately if they were taken to a public institution, which was why we could not call for an ambulance. But since both of them showed no visible injuries, it was probably fine.
Our top priority was questioning them, including the matter of the dragon mark changing color.
Since Kili's blood-covered appearance was too conspicuous, I used transmutation to create a simple coat for her to wear.
To conceal Kili and John, Iris and the rest of the girls walked around me and Ariella.
"....."

Vritra did not say a single word after seeing Kili, staying silent the whole time. With her head slightly lowered, she seemed to be contemplating something.
Just as Mitsuki pointed out, no one suspected us. In this manner, we reached home successfully.
Since the car was absent at my house, that meant Father had not returned from work yet. The faint aroma in the air probably came from Mother cooking dinner. Right now, no one was probably going to discover us carrying Kili and John into Mitsuki's house.
"Me~ow."
But the instant we opened the gate, I was startled by a cat's sound. I looked back to see the black cat Ohagi on the boundary wall, wagging its tail.
"Oh right... Back then, you were... So Ohagi, you're the kitten Kili saved."
Hearing me say that, Ohagi meowed as though answering yes.
Three years ago, at Kili's request, I had taken the kitten home. The next day, just as Kili predicted, Hekatonkheir approached the town. Without giving me much time to look after the kitten, even before I had a chance to give it a name, I was taken away.
Ohagi jumped down from the wall and approached my feet. It seemed quite interested in Kili whom I was carrying on my back. Perhaps it still remembered Kili who had saved it.
"Nii-san, what is going on?"
After hearing my mutterings, Mitsuki demanded an explanation.
"Three years ago, I came across Kili jumping into the river to rescue a kitten. Kili entrusted the kitten to me and asked me to run away, warning me Hekatonkheir was coming."
I briefly explained my encounter with Kili to everyone.
"The day before that incident, Kili-san..."
Despite feeling surprised, Mitsuki still turned her key and opened the door at the entryway. We entered the house and Ohagi followed along. Thus, we made our way to the master bedroom on the second floor used by Lisa, Firill and Tia.
After we laid Kili and John on the large two-person bed for them to sleep, Mitsuki went to tell Mother we had returned.
"...Kili-san's dragon mark definitely started changing in color."
While waiting for Mitsuki, Lisa stared at Kili's right hand and commented.
"But why on earth? Isn't Vritra the only dragon remaining?"
Firill glanced sideways at Vritra.
"—I am not the one who selected her. Moreover, without needing a mate, I am able to produce offspring inheriting mine authority."
Vritra spoke, staring at the dragon mark whose edges had turned purple.
Offspring inheriting her authority—That most likely meant us, the Ds.
"Then what exactly chose Kili?"
"Mm..."
Ariella cocked her head in puzzlement and Ren concurred.

"Mononobe..."
Iris tugged my clothing. Lisa also looked at me. Her eyes seemed to be trying to convey a message.
They both knew of another dragon. Namely, Midgard's principal, Charlotte B. Lord—the "Gray" Vampire.
Nevertheless, I shook my head because I really could not imagine her selecting Kili.
Calling herself the guardian of humanity, she had devoted all her efforts towards protecting Ds. I did not think she would do something like this.
Furthermore, this color was—
"A dragon mark's change in color will depend on the targeting dragon. Tia's was red, Firill's was yellow. If it's purple... Isn't that the Kraken?"
Tia spoke hesitantly. This thought must have occurred to everyone present, but...
"The purple dragon, 'Purple' Kraken, was exterminated two years ago, so that is impossible."
Lisa rejected Tia's suggestion on everyone's behalf while displaying a slightly mournful demeanor.
Two years ago, during the Kraken battle, her classmate, a girl named Shinomiya Miyako, had been selected and turned into a dragon.
Although Mitsuki had defeated the two dragons, it left immense trauma in everyone's hearts.
"That's true... Then it's unrelated to the Kraken."
Tia sighed and conceded but at this time, someone spoke from the bed.
"—No, Tia's conclusion is correct."
I took a closer look to see Kili opening her eyes slightly, looking in our direction.
"Kili!? You woke up!"
I approached the bed, looking at Kili's face.
"...Yes, because I heard talking."
Kili smiled and nodded. Originally waiting next to a wall in the room, Ohagi instantly came near and jumped lightly onto the bed.
"Me~ow."
Ohagi rubbed its forehead against Kili's cheek. Seeing this, Kili partially closed her eyes in nostalgia.
"It grew up."
Hearing me say that, Kili widened her eyes in surprise.
"Really? So you remembered what happened three years ago."
"Yeah."
"Why now...? You clearly had no idea when we met in Midgard."
Kili glared at me, somewhat displeased. When transferring into Midgard as Tachibana Honoka, she had used her current appearance—Perhaps she had the intent of wanting me to remember her.
"To be honest, Yggdrasil was eating away at my memories. I only remembered after Tia cancelled it for me."

Kili sighed in realization after listening to my explanation.
"So something like that had happened—Yuu... What is this cat's name...?"
"It's Ohagi."
"...Sounds like quite a delicious name."
Kili smiled wryly and petted Ohagi on the head. Seeing Ohagi purring in pleasure, Kili shifted her gaze to John who was lying beside her.
"How is he?"
"Oh right, he's fine, only unconscious. Although we didn't conduct a full-body diagnosis."
Ariella, the one who carried John here, was the one who answered. I felt that she was trying to say something between the lines, but Kili seemed to understand and exhaled in relief.
"Is that so...? I'm glad to hear that. I need him to survive and return the favor after forcing me to do something so risky."
"Kili, what the heck happened? You just said Tia's conclusion is correct..."
I asked her cautiously. The smile vanished from Kili's face.
"Earlier, I was tracking John's... whereabouts. The trail started at the barricaded Asgard lab, left behind by something's movements, so I followed the clues. Finally, there—I discovered *it*."
"It?"
"A monster wrapped in silver threads. The threads are most likely made of mithril. Furthermore, the monster has the ability to release antimatter. I barely managed to rescue John from its clutches then escaped here."
Everyone gasped after listening to Kili.
"Mithril and antimatter? That is practically... the 'Purple' Kraken, isn't it!?"
Lisa cried out in surprise.
"Yes, so I believe Tia is correct. Perhaps that's—!?"
Kili nodded in agreement. Just as she was about to say something, she frowned and brought her right hand before her face.
"What is this...?"
Kili gasped and examined her dragon mark that was changing in color. It looked like she only noticed the change now.
"—To think that this situation hath arisen now, when all mine original plans were foiled."
Originally standing behind our group, Vritra walked up to the front at this time.
"...Who are you?"
"Recognize me not? Daughter of mine?"
Seeing Kili frown, Vritra smiled sardonically at her.
"No way—Mother?"
Kili looked shocked while staring at the young girl who greatly resembled her.
"Indeed. I created this stand-in to hold a discussion with Yggdrasil... But if what thou sayst is true, mayhap I did something redundant."

Vritra spoke while looking at Kili's dragon mark. She smiled. She looked delighted from the bottom of her heart—A grin of glee. A chill rushed along my spine.
"Mother...?"
Even Kili was unable to fathom what Vritra was thinking and groaned with a stiff expression. At this moment, frantic footsteps arrived outside the room.
"Bad news, everyone!"
Mitsuki opened the door and rushed in, crying out with her face gone pale.
"What's the matter? Mitsuki-chan?"
Iris asked the panting Mitsuki.
"I received a call from Shinomiya-sensei just now..."
Holding her portable terminal in her right hand, Mitsuki swept her gaze across us in the room.
Then she took a deep breath to calm herself and continued:
"—Sensei says that the Kraken's juvenile form is currently heading to this town."

Part 3

'Asgard apparently preserved the Kraken's corpse underground at the research lab we were at.'
On the screen of the portable terminal Mitsuki was holding on her palm, Shinomiya-sensei explained the situation to us with a bitter expression. Gathered around Mitsuki, we exclaimed in surprise, but what came next shocked us even more.
'One part of the corpse exhibited lingering signs of biological activity. Researchers hypothesized that it could be the Kraken's offspring.'
"The Kraken's offspring... Wouldn't that be Miyako's—"
Mitsuki's voice trembled. Shinomiya-sensei nodded gravely.
'Due to becoming a mate, having offspring would not be unexpected—That is probably what they think.'
"A child born from a union with a dragon..."
Iris murmured with undisguised disgust. The other girls seemed to feel a chill, hugging themselves as a result.
'What exhibited signs of biological activity, a part of a tentacle, was kept under extremely low temperature. While it was kept under those conditions, there were evidently no changes of note.'
Kept under extremely low temperature…?
I recalled the *coffin* I had seen at Miyazawa Kenya's lab. Inside that freezer-like facility, there was a coffin kept under strict security. He had told me it was a human cadaver—
"...Onii-chan."
Ren apparently recalled the same thing. She looked at me with serious eyes.
"Shinomiya-sensei—I think I might know about that storage location."
'What?'
"Director Miyazawa led me to a room that was like a freezer, asking me to spread Ether Wind around the coffin that was kept there. He said it was a human cadaver... The manifested soul also looked like a human girl... Could that be—"
I stopped here. Immediately, Mitsuki continued in hoarse voice:
"Nii-san, are you saying that it was the soul of Miyako after she became a Kraken?"
"I believe it's possible. Now that I think back, the impression I got from her was quite similar to Shinomiya-sensei."
I spoke while recalling that soul's outline, formed from particles.

'...I will pursue that matter separately with Director Miyazawa. Let us discuss unconfirmed information later. Right now, I only wish to discuss facts.'
Shinomiya-sensei spoke in stiff tone of voice. Seeing as Shinomiya Miyako was her little sister, I would expect her to feel turmoil inside. But as Midgard's commander, she continued to explain:
'Yggdrasil was causing electrical interference over a wide area during the previous battle. Due to this, even the lab's backup power supply was cut off completely. Naturally, cooling equipment stopped functioning. Reportedly, a few hours later, the juvenile Kraken hatched.'
"Originally in a state of suspended animation under low temperature, then becoming active because of the rise in temperature huh...?"
Ariella wondered with her arms crossed.
'The chain of cause and effect is uncertain at the moment, so there could be other factors too. Regardless, the juvenile Kraken wrecked the lab after waking up and escaped to the ground surface. That happened roughly thirty-six hours ago.'
Shinomiya-sensei's tone of voice conveyed strong anxiety and sarcasm.
"...Asgard intends to cover this up."
Firill said with a sigh.
'Indeed, it would deal a severe blow to the organization's credibility if this incident came to light. Hence, Asgard ordered NIFL to act, intending to clean up while keeping all information under control.'
Lisa forced a smile after hearing Shinomiya-sensei.
"However, now that they are passing the information to us, it implies that... Their operation to handle the situation secretly has failed."
'—Indeed. The forces they deployed were completely routed. Running out of options, they sought Midgard's aid. Although it is quite late at this point, we can't ignore them either. Also, the juvenile Kraken suddenly changed directions and started heading towards your town.'
After saying this, Shinomiya-sensei gazed at us from the other side of the screen.
'There are limited reasons why a dragon would act in this manner. Among you, has anyone's dragon mark exhibited changes?'
"Well, Shinomiya-sensei, regarding this matter..."
Mitsuki raised her hand and told her about us taking in Kili, whose dragon mark had changed in color. During the process, Mitsuki threw a glance at Vritra in the corner of the room but did not report about her or John.
That was probably in consideration of the fact that Asgard or NIFL might be eavesdropping on the call. If news of Vritra spread, her discussion with Tia might get obstructed. With that, there was a possibility that Vritra, who had made a rare gesture to talk in peace, would turn into an enemy.
As for Kili, it was already decided during the Hraesvelgr battle that Midgard would protect her. Hence, even if NIFL were to found out, our stance would still remain unchanged.

'...I understand the situation now. Brynhildr Class will stay on standby over there together with Kili. A helicopter will head over to your side soon.'
Shinomiya-sensei issued orders in a grave tone of voice, biting her lip with an expression as though she was enduring something. Then she called Mitsuki's name as though forcing a voice out.
'Mononobe Mitsuki—'
"...I understand. If the enemy is the juvenile Kraken, then my antimatter projectiles will undoubtedly be able to vanquish it. I have already resolved myself. No problem."
Mitsuki clenched her fist and spoke resolutely.
'Is that so? I am counting on you.'
Shinomiya-sensei bowed her head sorrowfully in supplication then ended the call.
The room fell into silence. Everyone had their hands full, simply taking in the situation.
"Mitsuki-san... Will you really be alright?"
Lisa showed care to Mitsuki with an uneasy expression.
"Yes—The enemy is not Miyako's child but the Kraken's juvenile form. Not a human but totally just a dragon. Hence... I can do it."
Mitsuki answered as though persuading herself. Seeing Mitsuki like that, no one could say anything more on the matter.
However, I—after retrieving many memories, the current me... was able to sense Mitsuki's hesitation.
Despite looking like she had resolved herself, Mitsuki's heart was still indecisive.
"Mitsuki—"
Sensing her unease, I reached out to Mitsuki but she picked up the black cat Ohagi in her arms and walked to the bedroom's door.
"Before the helicopter arrives, we will first have dinner, everyone. The food is already ready."
After urging the girls and Vritra to go eat, Mitsuki looked at the remaining Kili.
"Kili-san, please stay here. I will bring food shortly after. If John wakes up, I would like you to help explain the situation to him."
"...Sure."
Kili answered in a slightly stiff tone of voice, then looked at Vritra warily.
Silent the whole time, Vritra left the room without saying a word. Although her silence felt somewhat bizarre to me, I still followed and departed.

Part 4

"You really have it tough, having to work even at this late hour."
"Although I'm not sure what's going on... Please be careful, all of you."
Father and Mother were worriedly seeing us off at the entryway. Night had fallen in this area with more stars shining in the sky than in Tokyo.
"Yes, Father and Mother. We will set off now."
Mitsuki nodded with a tense expression, turned around, and left. The rest of us also say goodbye and exited the house.
We had been notified just now that the helicopter had arrived in the nearby park. Leaving Kili in this town, we were setting off to take down the juvenile Kraken.
We were supposed to hide Kili in a NIFL base but considering past precedent, it was impossible to trust NIFL. Since they might attempt to execute Kili, our only choice was to shore up defenses over here instead.
"So, Tia-san, Lisa-san and Firill-san—the rest will be up to you now."
Mitsuki stopped in front of the house next door and spoke to the trio.
Tia was in charge of restraining Vritra whose objective was still unknown.
Lisa and Firill were in charge of guarding and monitoring Kili.
Dividing our forces was admittedly disadvantageous, but there was no other choice considering the possibility that Kili might be attacked. That being said, Mitsuki was probably more wary of Vritra than NIFL's interference. I also felt a sense of danger that she must not be left to roam free.
Silent during dinner, Vritra currently had her head lowered while staying at our side.
"Just leave Vritra to Tia!"
Perhaps sensing my unease, Tia spoke cheerfully and accepted her mission.
Then after examining Vritra's reaction briefly, she drew near my face and said:
"...As soon as Vritra makes any sign of generating dark matter, Tia will steal it right away. Tia will definitely succeed like Yggdrasil."
Tia whispered an additional explanation.
"We will take care and not allow Kili-san to act recklessly."
"Even if someone attacks, we'll defeat them."
Lisa and Firill replied to Mitsuki, but as soon as Mitsuki left, they immediately waved to me.
"Mononobe Yuu... I entrust Mitsuki-san in your care."

"Mononobe-kun... You must watch Mitsuki carefully and prevent her from pushing herself too far."
Having known Mitsuki for so long, the two girls seemed to have reached the same conclusions as me that Mitsuki was currently very unstable.
"—Leave it to me. I will protect Mitsuki for sure."
I had already resolved myself to do that, so I nodded firmly.
Starting three years ago—No, even before that... Ever since Mitsuki lost her parents, left all alone, I had decided to protect her.
No matter what kind of sacrifice, even if it meant losing precious memories, I had always upheld that determination of mine.
By this point, that way of living was not going to falter.
"Yuu."
I heard someone call to me. I looked up to see Kili gazing down from the second floor window.
"Will you sincerely protect me this time?"
Kili asked me as though testing my reaction.
During the Hraesvelgr battle, I had failed to protect her. Had Kili's dragon mark been suitable for Hraesvelgr, she would have turned into a dragon at the time.
"Yeah, I definitely will."
I was not going to repeat the same failure. With this determination, I nodded and promised her.
"...I believe you."
Kili's expression showed faint joy while she waved goodbye to me.
Just as she withdrew back into the room, I looked at Vritra.
"Vritra, right now... Are you pleased?"
My question caused Vritra's shoulders to shake once.
She gradually looked up. Her facial expression—was blank. No emotions surfaced.
My back kept breaking out in cold sweat. My body was instinctively reacting warily against what could not be understood.
"I don't know your objective, but... Even if the current situation is in your favor, I don't think you're someone who could feel joy from the bottom of your heart when sacrificing your daughter—sacrificing Kili."
"...Wherefore?"
Vritra asked me expressionlessly.
"Because after spending a whole day with you, I believe we might be able to understand each other. Iris definitely hopes you could understand and respect humans."
I glanced at Iris who was listening to the conversation from the side.
"Vritra-chan..."
Iris looked at Vritra with an uneasy expression.
"..."
Vritra silently avoided her gaze.
"Nii-san, Iris-san, time to go."

Mitsuki hurried us. Before setting off, I added one final thing.
"Let's go for ice cream again after we return."
"—"
She did not answer.
However, I believed this one-sided promise would be upheld for sure. Then I turned around and departed with my back to the dragon girl.

Pushing through the crowd of onlookers who had gathered around the park, we boarded the helicopter and were taken to a NIFL staging area.
It was very noisy with many soldiers walking around. Dressed in school uniform, we looked especially conspicuous, but the soldiers did not stare at us. Not only that, they were overtly shifting their gazes away, pretending not to see us.
They most likely could tell we were Ds. I had forgotten because everyone I was in contact with recently were understanding of Ds, but this was actually people's typical reaction to Ds. It was very hard not to feel fear towards beings possessing superhuman powers.
Not bringing Kili along was the correct decision after all.
"...Onii-chan."
Ren tugged my clothing uneasily.
"It's okay, don't mind them."
"...Mm."
I held Ren's hand and smiled at her. Slightly reassured, she nodded in response.
"Mononobe... Everyone feels so nervous."
Iris could feel the tension in the air and whispered to me.
"Because they just fought the juvenile Kraken and were routed. I guess they suffered quite heavy losses."
I lowered my voice to prevent the soldiers in charge of leading us from overhearing.
"I'm not too clear on what happened two years ago, but nothing works on the Kraken unless we rely on Mitsuki's antimatter, right? It seems too reckless of them to fight using NIFL alone, or perhaps... There was some reason why they originally thought they could win?"
Listening to Iris' conversation with me, Ariella cocked her head incredulously.
"...We won't know until we hear the detailed report. However, it's also possible that this Kraken is different from the ones two years ago."
I offered my opinion and Ariella nodded "that's true too."
Mitsuki did not join our conversation. With a solemn demeanor, she walked silently. She had been like that the whole time since boarding the helicopter.
As much as I wanted to talk to Mitsuki, before I could think of an appropriate topic, we were taken to a room in a building. It was a small

conference room. In front of a monitor installed straight ahead, Shinomiya-sensei was waiting for us with a serious expression.
"Good work getting here. Then I'll start the explanation of the current situation."
After we sat down on the front row, Shinomiya-sensei dispensed with pleasantries and began to explain to us.
"Asgard has named the Kraken's juvenile form 'Kraken Zwei,' which we will use henceforth. The target is currently heading to Nanato City where you were staying, moving in the mountains at a speed of four kilometers per hour."
"Four kilometers per hours is quite slow. That's about the same as our normal walking speed."
Ariella remarked in surprise.
"That stems from Kraken Zwei's size. Perhaps because it's newly born, the target is very tiny."
After saying that, Shinomiya-sensei showed a video on the monitor. A silver object could be seen in the middle of a crater gouged out of the ground. The object was an elongated oval with silver threads spreading from its base in a radial pattern.
"This is Kraken Zwei's appearance. Although the body length is less than two meters, the silver threads can attack up to dozens of meters in range. Furthermore, the main body seems impervious to all attacks, wrapped in the cocoon of silver threads."
Looking at he Kraken shown on the monitor, Mitsuki spoke up:
"The original Kraken had tentacles of mithril. Assuming this Kraken Zwei inherited that trait, I expect the threads to be extremely fine strands of mithril."
"—I hold the same opinion. Furthermore, it is already confirmed that Kraken Zwei can likewise fire antimatter like the original."
Shinomiya-sensei supported Mitsuki's view and displayed a new photo on the monitor. The photo showed part of the silver strands from the cocoon opening up, during the very moment when a blinding flash was released.
"Its defenses are partially lowered when firing antimatter... This is the same as the original too. I expect they have already attempted to seize that opening to attack?"
"They did, but reportedly failed. The target is extremely observant, capable of reacting to any attack with precision no matter what."
Shinomiya-sensei continued in a grave tone of voice after replying:
"Hence, the most effective method is to use antimatter to destroy everything outright along with the mithril shield."
"Yes."
Mitsuki nodded deeply in agreement. At this moment, Iris raised her hand.
"Umm... Won't my Catastrophe work?"

"Indeed, Catastrophe is a powerful means of attack but the weathering of mithril is extremely time consuming. Just as we used mithril to resist Basilisk's attacks, the chances of the beam getting blocked are very high."
Iris went "Oh I see..." and put her hand down after listening to Shinomiya-sensei's answer. Iris evidently wanted to use her power to ease Mitsuki's burden.
"Since methods are limited, the operation is exceedingly simple. You will approach the target while NIFL draws its attention using unmanned drones. Mononobe Mitsuki will fire antimatter projectiles while I hope the rest of you will provide support."
Shinomiya-sensei outlined the plan concisely. Indeed, there was nothing simpler than this operation.
"In more concrete terms, what does support mean we have to do?"
Ariella raised a question and Shinomiya-sensei answered in a serious tone of voice:
"Do everything you can to adapt to the changing situation. Your mithril shields should be able to defend against attacks from the silver threads made of the same material. Mononobe Yuu's antigravity is the only means to defend against antimatter attacks. Iris Freyja's Catastrophe should be able to pin down the enemy even if it is blocked. Ren Miyazawa's massive dark matter generating capacity should help in breaking out of emergencies."
Shinomiya-sensei looked at each of our faces in sequence while directing the operation.
"—Any other questions? If not, the operation will begin right away. I hope the battle can be settled while the target is on the mountain."
I looked over the members of the group. No one seemed to have any objections.
—Was it okay to leave things to Mitsuki like this?
Although this sense of unease occupied my heart, I could not reject the current plan on grounds of emotions without providing an alternative solution.
"Then let the operation begin."
"—Yes ma'am!"
In any case, I'll protect Mitsuki from the side—Making that decision, I nodded in response to Shinomiya-sensei's command.

Part 5

Following the NIFL drones, we flew through the night sky.
Lacking flying skills, Iris and I were carried by Ren and Ariella respectively.
As the key personnel in the operation, Mitsuki was flying alone.
In order to be able to attack from long range, the goggles issued to us were equipped with telescope functions in addition to communications. It was the same type that Lisa had used for sniping during the Basilisk battle in the past.
Although the goggles also provided night vision, the NIFL drones would fire flares for illumination once the operation began, so there was no need for us to use such functionality.
"...So dark, down there."
While transporting me, Ren looked down at the ground.
"It's all mountains nearby, so it's definitely suitable for a battlefield."
Since both sides were going to be firing antimatter at each other, damage to the environment would be unavoidable. Hence, I could understand Shinomiya-sensei's determination to end the battle before the target reached urban areas.
"—Although the drones definitely lowered their speed, keeping up with aircraft is actually pretty tough."
In the middle of transporting Iris, Ariella commented with sweat appearing on her brow.
The outlines of the three drones flying in front could not be seen due to the darkness of the sky, but we were able to use the red lights on the drones as beacons, moving at high speed.
"Shinomiya-sensei said the target's not very far, so we'll surely get there soon. Hang in there, Ariella-chan!"
Iris encouraged the exhausted Ariella.
At this moment, Shinomiya-sensei happened to speak on the communicator.
'You are about to arrive at the combat zone. Kraken Zwei is currently engaged in battle against NIFL's ground weapons. Slow down your flying and let the drones go first. Once the flares are up and the target comes into view, Mononobe Mitsuki will attack using antimatter.'
"—Affirmative."
Just as we replied, a huge explosion happened ahead.
The starry sky instantly turned white while we heard a heavy explosion.

While we slowed down, the drones pulled ahead and flew towards the explosion's location.
Several seconds later, multiple light sources appeared in the sky, apparently flares, illuminating the surrounding scenery.
Perhaps the result of ground weaponry in combat, the land in the vicinity had turned barren with multiple large craters superimposed on one another. A large patch of the mountain forest had been gouged out.
And in the center, a small silver entity was reflecting light from the flares.
"That's—"
I operated my goggles to magnify the image.
The same silver cocoon as what we had seen in the conference room monitor—Kraken Zwei, all covered by threads of mithril.
The drones circled in the air above it and started attacking with machine guns, but of course, that level of firepower was all deflected by the mithril cocoon.
Then just as the machine gun barrage concluded, purple light flashed from a gap in the cocoon. The small projectile of light sank into a drone, then immediately caused a giant explosion far surpassing a flare's brightness. It was most likely attacking with antimatter.
Caught in the annihilating explosion, a second drone exploded next, leaving only one.
"—Commence sniping!"
Mitsuki shouted acutely then raised her fictional armament of a bow—Brionac. Once all the drones were shot down, there would be no diversions left. Mitsuki had no time to waste.
Nocking an arrow of dark matter to the bow, Mitsuki aimed at the target.
Although I could see nervousness and a stiff demeanor from the side of her face, there was the light of fierce resolve in her eyes
"It is a dragon, an enemy that must be defeated."
Mitsuki persuaded herself while drawing the bow.
The final remaining drone suddenly stopped unnaturally in the air. Upon closer examination, I could see shining silver threads entangling the fuselage.
—Could the threads of mithril extend that far?
According to Shinomiya-sensei, the range was dozens of meters but from what I could see, it looked like almost a hundred meters.
Perhaps deciding defense was no longer essential after restraining the drone, the cocoon swiftly unraveled.
Purple light could be seen from the gradually expanding gaps.
I had seen reference photographs of the Kraken during lectures at Midgard.
A monster with a giant purple eyeball and countless tentacles—That was what the Kraken looked like.
Hence, I always thought the "inside" protected by the silver cocoon would be something similar.
However—

"Eh...?"
Mitsuki exclaimed in surprise.
Iris, the others and I all gasped in surprise.
Emerging from the cocoon was a young girl. The exceptionally long silver hair writhed as though it had a will of its own. Only then did I realize that the silver threads constituting the cocoon was actually her hair.
Although naked, she had part of her hair wrapped around her body.
Younger than Tia in appearance. Her left eye was covered her long bangs. The exposed right eye was glowing purple. The instant that light intensified, a beam shot at the drone. With a flash of light tearing through the sky, afterimages were left on the retinas of observers.
Then with a massive explosion and noise, struck by the glowing projectile, the drone was devoured by the light of annihilation.
Then the girl looked in our direction with her eye that had released light of destruction.
"...We're discovered!?"
The instant our gazes met, I felt a chill rush along my spine. Instantly creating my fictional armament of a gun, I prepared to fire antigravity bullets any time.
"Mitsuki! We'll get taken out unless you attack soon!"
Ariella called out anxiously.
However, Mitsuki did not move, frozen in her pose with the fictional armament of a bow raised. Kraken Zwei seemed to be examining us in return without attacking immediately.
But time was probably in short supply for hesitation.
"Wrong..."
Mitsuki murmured to herself in a trembling voice.
"Mitsuki-chan—The Kraken is looking at us!"
Iris alerted of danger in an urgent voice, but Mitsuki kept shaking her head while trembling.
"Wrong... It is wrong."
"What is 'wrong'—"
"That is not the Kraken!"
Mitsuki interrupted Iris and yelled.
"Hmm... I get what you're trying to say, but if you don't make a move—"
Ariella hurried Mitsuki in a stiff tone of voice.
"I know! But... But no matter how I look..."
Accompanied by tears appearing in the corners of her eyes, Mitsuki's voice trembled.
"That is... She is—Miyako's child!!"
Mitsuki cried out hoarsely.
In the form of a young girl, Kraken Zwei had an extremely lovely face. The impression I got was very similar to Shinomiya-sensei's.
But what Mitsuki saw in the girl's face was probably the image of her best friend in the past, Shinomiya Miyako.

"…Mitsuki, let's withdraw for now."
Making the judgment call that Mitsuki was unable to fire at the girl, I suggested a retreat.
"Withdraw?"
Mitsuki was taken aback for a moment. Then relief appeared on her face. However, she immediately came to a sudden realization, bit her lip hard and shook her head.
"No... Even so, I have no choice but to do it... I am the only one capable of defeating her..."
Despite looking like she was about to cry, Mitsuki refused to back down.
"Mitsuki-chan...?"
Iris watched her in worry.
"Sorry, everyone, I have put on an embarrassing display. However... I am fine now."
Despite the blow to her psyche, Mitsuki still barely managed to support herself with her sense of duty and obligation as the captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad.
"Even if it is not a dragon, by my own hand, I must... Just like that time with Miyako—"
With trembling hands, Mitsuki tried to aim her arrow at the target. However—Mitsuki suddenly lost balance and dropped in altitude.
"Huh...?"
Mitsuki was shocked. The fictional armament in her hand turned into black bubbles and started to disappear.
"Why—"
Dark matter was controlled by the mind. A so-called fictional armament was the mind's combat state.
—Sure enough, Mitsuki could not do it.
Because no matter how much she bluffed, Mitsuki was internally resisting the idea of vanquishing Kraken Zwei.
"Ren, fly over to near Mitsuki!"
I called out to Ren who was holding my left hand to support me in the air. Mitsuki could not sustain her flying due to her fictional armament beginning to collapse.
"Mm!"
Ren instantly realized in alarm and nodded to me in response, then approached Mitsuki.
"Mitsuki, grab onto Ren!"
I shouted to Mitsuki who was about to fall to the ground.
"—!"
Mitsuki clung to Ren's neck and managed to avoid falling, but... even without physical injuries, her mind was not in a state capable of fighting.
"Sorry... Sorry..."
Mitsuki pressed her face against the front of Ren's chest and kept apologizing.

Was she sorry for failing to fulfill her duties? Or was she feeling remorse for Shinomiya Miyako? I could not tell.
"—It's okay, Mitsuki-chan."
The one who spoke to Mitsuki was Iris, hovering in the air through Ariella's assistance.
"I will fight in your stead, Mitsuki-chan."
Iris raised her free hand, which started glowing red. It was the light of Catastrophe, capable of weathering all substances within its range of influence.
"Caduceus Catastrophe!"
A staff of red light manifested in Iris' hand.
Pointing the staff's tip at Kraken Zwei, Iris recited something like an incantation:
"Come, come, fragments of time..."
Seeing the red staff glow progressively brighter, I asked Iris:
"Iris, you can bring yourself to do it?"
"Yes, because even though it looks like a girl... That's the dragon targeting Kili-chan, the enemy that must be defeated. Also—"
Iris paused, looked at Mitsuki and smiled.
"—I want to protect Mitsuki-chan. This is for her sake and yours."
I could feel from Iris' tone of voice that she truly wished for Mitsuki and my happiness. Just like her joy when my memories recovered, Iris smiled and ignored her own *pain*.
With eyes burning with the light of fierce resolve, Iris turned her gaze back to Kraken Zwei.
The dazzling red light at the staff's tip expanded, but at this moment, I saw several black spheres appear around Kraken Zwei.
—Don't tell me that's dark matter!?
"Catastrophe, actualize!!"
While I was holding my breath, Iris released the time-stealing light.
However, just as that brightness dazzled me, I saw them. I saw the black spheres change in shape, manifesting a silver shield in front of Kraken Zwei —
Unerringly, the red light of Iris' Catastrophe devoured the spot where the girl was standing.
Unprecedented in scale... A gigantic beam of Catastrophe was fired, possibly surpassing that of Basilisk's.
"Amazing... This might be able to destroy it together with the mithril defenses."
Ariella exclaimed, impressed.
Mithril was the most stable alloy and highly resistant against Catastrophe. Be that as it may, it could not escape the weathering caused by time.
The surrounding rocks, soil and collapsed trees were turned into fine sand. The location exposed to the red light was gradually turned into a desert.

Changes that originally required thousands, tens of thousands of years were completed in an instant.
Nevertheless, a silver object rushed out from the giant beam of light that stole time persistently.
It was Kraken Zwei, the girl whose body was completely wrapped in hair of mithril.
"No! She's still alive!"
I raised Siegfried, my gun-shaped fictional armament, and yelled.
She had most likely used transmutation to create a mithril shield to buy a bit of time in order to retreat from Catastrophe's line of fire.
"...!"
Iris hastily tried to correct her aim, but before that, a purple light flashed from a gap in the girl's hair.
"Antigravity!"
In that instant, I used all the dark matter in my fictional armament, firing it as a bullet.
The bullet of dark matter transmuted into high-density antigravitational matter along the way, generating a repulsive field nearby. Immediately, Kraken Zwei's beam of light was deflected greatly, disappearing into the distant night sky.
But at the same time, the repulsive field also distorted Catastrophe's trajectory, so Iris stopped firing the beam for now. Standing at the girl's former position was a silver shield with a large hole in its center.
"Someone hurry and deploy a smokescreen—block her view! We have to retreat to the ground for now!"
"Mm!"
Ren immediately answered my call.
Accompanied by an explosion of "bang," smoke shrouded the surroundings. Hiding inside the smoke, we descended to the ground.
We landed in the forest, escaped from Kraken Zwei's view and breathed out deeply. Although the forest was totally dark at night and the humid air was sticking to our skin, it was incomparably better than getting sniped by antimatter projectiles.
"Mononobe... What do we do next?"
Iris checked on Mitsuki while asking me. Holding onto Ren, Mitsuki did not look up.
"Most likely, she—can also control dark matter. If she uses transmutation to replenish mithril, then even Iris' Catastrophe won't be able to breach her defenses."
"In that case, we have no choice but to retreat..."
Ariella murmured after listening to me.
"Wait! If we run away like this without achieving anything, NIFL might try to kill Kili-chan. Then Lisa-chan and the others together with her will be in danger. We must pin down Kraken Zwei here at least!"

Iris interrupted Ariella in a strong tone of voice and raised her red staff.
Precisely because she had experienced being a target in the past, she poignantly understood the urgency of the current crisis.
"Pin her down... How do we do that?"
After hearing Ariella's question, someone spoke next to me.
"Onii-chan, I have an idea..."
"Ren?"
I saw Ren looking up at me with a serious expression.
"If the ground that's turned to sand is weathered further, a hole should appear. We can drop a large amount of mithril over the hole... Bury her alive."
"Even if you suggest burying her alive... But with antimatter shots—"
"She probably won't use it because she'll get caught in the explosions when firing antimatter while buried."
After listening to Ren's answer, I knew it was the best method.
"Right, if we use mithril as a lid, even mithril strands won't be able to cut it open easily. Escaping will be a challenge. If it works out, let alone pinning her down, we might even be able to seal her away completely."
We looked at one another, nodding in agreement.
"After Iris opens up a hole in the ground, I'll borrow dark matter from Ren to cast down a large amount of mithril. Mitsuki should wait here."
After saying that, Ariella took Iris and flew up into the air again.
Just as I was about to return to the sky with Ren, Mitsuki looked up in her depression.
"Nii-san—"
Mitsuki called out hoarsely, extending her hand helplessly.
"Don't worry, Mitsuki. We'll find a way to handle the rest."
"……Yes."
Mitsuki bit her lip in chagrin, lowered her head then nodded slightly.
"Let's go, everyone."
Leaving her behind, the rest of us carried out the plan devised by Ren.
—Siegfried.
I constructed my fictional armament again to guard against enemy attacks.
The instant we increased in altitude, purple light flew at us.
It was Kraken Zwei's antimatter shot.
—It's coming!
"Antigravity!"
The expected attack was deflected to a different direction by my bullet of repulsion. Then Iris fired Catastrophe immediately.
"Catastrophe, actualize!"
Simultaneously, Kraken Zwei created a mithril shield while the red beam was shot.
But that was fine, because Iris' target was the surrounding ground.
Already turned to sand, the land turned into tiny particles and dissipated.

Land erosion—The land, literally worn away by weather, was gradually gouged away. Then with a deep and heavy sound, the ground rumbled. Next came even more intense shaking.
Perhaps the weathering had reached deep underground. The ground collapsed over a wide area.
Together with her shield, Kraken Zwei was swallowed into the collapsing ground.
"Now is the time!"
"I know, Mononobe-kun!"
Without missing this opportunity, Ariella used dark matter borrowed from Ren to create a vast amount of mithril.
The silver rocks covered up the created hole while the deep rumbling reached the heavens. A cloud of dust shrouded the area.
"Anyway... Plan succeeded?"
Ariella breathed a sigh of relief and asked.
Even after waiting for a while, we did not see any changes in the blocks of mithril plugging the hole. Just as Ren predicted, using antimatter to escape would be very difficult.
"Yeah, although we didn't manage to defeat her, if the outcome is like this —"
Iris dispelled the red staff in her hand and wiped sweat from her brow.
"—Shinomiya-sensei, what do we do?"
Through the communicator, I called to our commander, Shinomiya-sensei.
'Everyone back to base. Leave the situation for NIFL's unmanned military hardware to survey and analyze.'
Shinomiya-sensei issued orders to us.
"—Affirmative!"
"Mm."
Ariella and Ren immediately responded and started to descend to where Mitsuki was waiting.
Enveloped in Ren's wind, I stared at the silver rocks that were sealing Kraken Zwei away.
If possible, I hoped she would stay there quietly underground and not come out.
Whether Mitsuki... Or Iris, as long as the situation permitted, I did not want them to dirty their hands.
That dragon looked far too human.
One knew just from appearance that she was half-human—in other words, a D.
I could not help but hope in my heart that it might be possible to communicate with her.
But now that she had targeted Kili, we could only be enemies.
Because from the perspective of Ds, dragons pursuing mates were natural predators that must be defeated.

Part 6

"—I am terribly sorry."
Back to the NIFL base, Mitsuki bowed her head deeply and apologized to Shinomiya-sensei.
The air was tense inside the dark operations room whose only illumination came from the monitors.
"No, you are not at fault. I didn't expect Kraken Zwei to resemble a human to such an unbelievable extent and for her face to be so similar to Miyako's... It is only natural you were unable to fire."
Shinomiya-sensei did not blame Mitsuki. She was looking at Kraken Zwei's appearance on the monitor.
Possessing hair of mithril she could control at will, she was the hybrid child between the Kraken and a D. Despite having the appearance of a young girl, she was a dragon that could even control dark matter as well.
Whether Mitsuki, as Shinomiya Miyako's best friend, or Shinomiya-sensei, her elder sister, neither of them could sever their ties so easily.
"But if only I had fired antimatter at the time... Kraken Zwei would have been taken out effortlessly—"
Her body shaking, Mitsuki bit her lip hard.
"Don't be so hard on yourself. We have already succeeded in sealing her movements with everyone's help. According to the results of NIFL's monitoring, Kraken Zwei seems to be showing no movements at the bottom of the hole. Even if she must be defeated sooner or later, we have ample time to strategize."
"That's right! Mitsuki-chan, you don't need to force yourself anymore!"
Iris clenched her fist tightly before her chest, speaking to Mitsuki in a strong tone of voice.
"Iris-san..."
"Mitsuki-chan, you should have a good rest first. Your face really looks unwell."
Just as Iris pointed out, Mitsuki's face was pallid and she looked like she was going to collapse any moment. Shinomiya-sensei agreed with Iris after looking at Mitsuki's face.
"She's right. Go rest. There is a nap room opposite from this room."
"But regarding our next move, as the captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad, I must—"
"Mononobe Mitsuki, this is an order."

Mitsuki tried to argue but Shinomiya-sensei interrupted her with a commanding tone of voice.
"...Yes ma'am."
Reluctantly, Mitsuki could only nod affirmatively. With unsteady footsteps, she exited the operations room.
"Shinomiya-sensei..."
Unable to leave Mitsuki alone the way she was right now, I spoke up.
Immediately, Shinomiya-sensei's expression showed comprehension of what I wanted to say. She nodded and motioned to the operations room's door with her eyes.
"Mononobe Yuu, you will stay at your sister's side for now."
"Thank you. Understood."
I followed her orders, only to see Ariella and the rest of the girls staring at me seriously.
"I've never seen Mitsuki like this. She might become unable to fight again if she isn't consoled properly at this time. Mononobe-kun, you must help her well."
"Onii-chan... Mitsuki is in your hands."
I nodded silently in response to Ariella and Ren.
"Mitsuki-chan definitely needs you... Mononobe, so you have to support her properly."
With slight sadness in her smile, Iris gave my back a push.
—Iris.
She probably had misgivings against fighting a dragon that had kept a human appearance, but even so, she still prioritized Mitsuki and me.
"Yeah... Don't overdo things yourself either, Iris."
After some hesitation, all I could say were such ordinary words of encouragement.
"Very well!"
Even so, Iris still smiled happily. Feeling a sharp pain in my heart, I walked out of the operations room.
I did not see Mitsuki in the corridor. She had probably entered the nap room.
Thinking that to myself, I opened the door to the room opposite the operations room but it was totally dark inside.
"Mitsuki?"
"—Nii-san?"
I felt relieved to hear her answer. Switching on the light, I walked over to the direction of her voice. Inside an area isolated behind curtains, I found Mitsuki sitting on the bed.
"Are you about to sleep? If that's the case, I'll switch off the light—"
I asked but MItsuki slowly shook her head.
"No... I cannot sleep right now, so there is no need to switch off the light. Nii-san... Did you come over because you are worried about me?"
Mitsuki smiled wryly and asked me with self-deprecation in her tone.

"Yeah."
"I am truly sorry... for causing you trouble, Nii-san. I must not act like this. Clearly I... resolved myself already..."
Mitsuki gripped the sheets on the mattress and looked down in chagrin.
"Hesitating in that kind of situation is only natural when you're human. Even if you possess the same power as a dragon, you don't have to change your mind into a monster too."
"But..."
"So-called resolve basically means giving up on something. There's nothing wrong with that and it's essential sometimes... But there are things that must not be cast away."
I spoke quietly while placing my hand on Mitsuki's head.
"I am currently thankful—Mitsuki, that you did not shoot earlier."
"Eh?"
Mitsuki stared at me, dumbfounded.
"Had you shot antimatter at the time, Mitsuki... You'd probably be in a nervous breakdown right now, and definitely broken to an irreparable degree."
To confirm whether Mitsuki's mind was not broken, I gently caressed her head.
"Mitsuki, you don't need to fight Kraken Zwei anymore. No, I won't let you fight."
"Nii-san... But—"
"No 'buts' so quit complaining. This is what I've decided as your *brother*."
I ruffled Mitsuki's hair brusquely and took my hand off her head.
"...Do not suddenly go abusing a brother's authority just because your memories recovered slightly."
Mitsuki fixed her tousled hair while pouting unhappily.
"Say no more, just leave the rest to me. Even if we must fight her again, Iris, the rest of the class and I will find a way."
Mitsuki's shoulders shook when I mentioned Iris' name.
"I seem to be... shoving hardship on Iris-san all the time."
"It's not like that. Iris is taking on the task on her own will."
I corrected Mitsuki and she immediately made a wry smile.
"Indeed... The same applies to the matter of Nii-san. She decided Nii-san's feelings on her own, trying to yield Nii-san to me... Actually, she is clearly suffering greatly."
Mitsuki sighed deeply and stared at me with serious eyes.
"Please worry more about Iris-san than me, Nii-san. Because Iris-san is the one you love, Nii-san."
"...Mitsuki, you're the one who's deciding my feelings on your own."
Despite feeling aware of the wavering in the depths of my heart, I still retorted against Mitsuki.
"Looks like, Nii-san, you do not understand your own feelings. That way, you will not be able to protect Iris-san, you know?"

After saying that, Mitsuki stood up from the edge of the bed.
"...Mitsuki?"
She was glaring at me within a breath's range, making me feel troubled.
"Nii-san... Please kiss me."
"Huh?"
I was frozen in surprise. Before my eyes, Mitsuki closed her eyes and tilted her face upwards slightly.
"Nii-san, you will understand if you do it. Because right now, you already know what it feels like to kiss the one you love."
Mitsuki had witness my kiss with Iris, which was why she was saying this now...
"No way, asking me to kiss for the sake of comparing—"
"Please do not escape! I beg you, Nii-san..."
Mitsuki spoke to me in a pleading tone of voice. Hearing her words, I understood that Mitsuki had mustered all her courage. To her, this was surely something essential.
I stared at Mitsuki's face, waiting to be kissed. Her cheeks were blushing, slight tears seeped out of her tightly shut eyes, her cherry lips looked so soft with fiery breath escaping from between them. The sight was causing my heart to race.
"...As you wish."
So far, no matter when, I always responded to Mitsuki's demands. Three years ago, it was for Mitsuki's sake that I had fought Hekatonkheir.
Hence, I was going to respond to her this time too.
...Even if that kind of outcome was not what Mitsuki desired.
I drew my face near, closing the distance between me and Mitsuki. My heart was brimming with the feelings accumulated from our time as childhood friends, as family.
The moment before our lips touched, I understood. I treasured Mitsuki even more than my own life.
To confirm feelings that went beyond that, I was about to kiss Mitsuki.
I could hear the sound of my heartbeat from the depths of my body.
Mitsuki's warm breath was reaching my face.
On Mitsuki's long eyelashes were glinting tears.
Closing in enough such that all I could see was her face, I closed my eyes too.
What remained was simply... closing the residual gap between us.

—Purururururu.
However, a ringtone sounded from the side of the bed, dumping cold water on the heightened atmosphere.
Mitsuki and I opened our eyes in surprise.
"Eh... Kyah!?"
Seeing my face right before her eyes, Mitsuki went bright red. Leaning backwards, she fell on the bed entirely.
"Seems like an incoming call."
With embarrassed feelings, I pointed at Mitsuki's portable terminal on the bed.
"Y-Yes. Please bear with me for a moment. Oh... It is from Lisa-san."
Mitsuki answered in a stiff tone of voice then pressed the button on the terminal to pick up the call. Immediately, Lisa's face came on the screen.
'Mitsuki-san, bad news! Vritra is heading your way!'
Without any introductory explanation, Lisa spoke anxiously.
What—!?
My heart was beating intensely.
"Eh? Vritra...?"
Mitsuki showed a grave expression while she asked Lisa.
'Her target is you, Mitsuki-san! Please take precautions immediately!'
"You are saying her target is me...? Why? Even if Vritra were to act, her target ought to be Kili-san who has caught Kraken Zwei's eye—"
Mitsuki asked, perplexed.
We had already expected to some extent that Vritra might make some kind of move.
Hence that was why we had left Tia behind to monitor her. In front of Tia, Vritra could not use dark matter freely. Tia had said that she was able to steal dark matter just like Yggdrasil.
Furthermore, Kili herself was not an easy opponent.
Hence, I originally thought that Kili would be fine, but never did I expect Vritra to target Mitsuki—
'...Rather than handing a mate over, Vritra is apparently prioritizing the protection of the juvenile Kraken. Hence, that is why she is targeting you, Mitsuki-san, given your ability to generate antimatter!'
"In other words, we have no means of taking down Kraken Zwei once I am gone... That seems to be what she is thinking."
'Right, that is what I fear. Tia-san and Firill-san are currently chasing after —'
Mid-sentence, there was a massive rumbling and the building shook violently.
It was no earthquake. That was the sound of an explosion just now.
'...Looks like she has arrived.'
Right after Lisa remarked with a bitter expression, a loud siren began blaring in the NIFL base—

Chapter 4 - "Black" Vritra

Part 1

Turning the clock back slightly earlier—At Mitsuki's currently uninhabited house in Nanato City.
The second-floor bedroom was occupied by a heavy atmosphere.
The crossdressing girl, Jeanne Hortensia, remained unconscious, lying on the bed. While pressing on her right hand, whose dragon mark was changing color, Kili was on the bed, examining Jeanne's sleeping face.
Sitting on the bed's edge, Vritra stared out the window.
Having moved futons from the adjacent room to lay out on the floor, Tia, Lisa and Firill were watching Vritra and Kili.
There was no electricity in this house and the flashlights they had brought were switched off, hence the room was dark. However, due to the moonlight and starlight streaming in from the window, they could still discern one another's facial expressions.
"...Mononobe-kun and the others will be okay, right? Maybe they've already started fighting the Kraken."
Firill wondered in worry.
"No need to worry. By now, Mononobe Yuu and Iris-san have replicated dragon powers in addition to Mitsuki-san. The situation is more favorable compared to the Kraken battle two years ago."
"If it's Yuu and the others... They'll surely win."
Tia rubbed her eyes drowsily while agreeing with Lisa.
But after listening to them, Vritra suddenly spoke up.
"'Twould be a grave mistake if ye regard the enemy as the Kraken."
"Huh?"
Firill and the girls looked at Vritra in surprise. Originally observing Jeanne, Kili also looked back with an incredulous expression.
"Born from the mate, offspring betwixt a dragon and a D. To me who standeth as the mother of Ds, 'tis tantamount to my grandchild."
Vritra spoke calmly while Lisa watched her warily.
"...What are you implying?"
"This is the birth of a hybrid dragon inheriting mine and the Kraken's authorities, the second generation I have long anticipated."
After replying Vritra got off the bed and approached the window.
"Hybrid dragon? Second generation? What do you know about the Kraken's child?"
Firill asked with a frown.

"—Everything. The genes allowing you Ds to wield mine authority... Everything is engraved upon them. Everything is preordained. After encountering Yggdrasil's obstruction, I continued using Hekatonkheir to spread genes. These efforts have finally bore fruit."
Vritra's shoulders shook as she laughed happily.
"Mother, you seem to have gotten talkative suddenly. What are you planning?"
"....."
Kili asked with nervousness in her voice. Vritra opened the window without saying a word. Instantly, the night's chilly breeze blew into the room, causing the girls' hair to flutter in the wind.
"Although I don't know Mother's plan entirely, I can guess the gist, so allow me to say this: Don't do anything unnecessary. So long as Tia, capable of controlling Yggdrasil, and *he* are present... Mother's plan is not needed."
Staring into the black pupils of her mother, Vritra, Kili asserted.
"*He*...? Dost thou truly believe that irregular is Neun?"
"Not just me but Yggdrasil also wanted to obtain him—obtain Yuu—hence he must be..."
"Even if thy speculation proveth to be correct, I will still achieve mine objective personally."
Vritra interrupted Kili in a fierce tone of voice. Unable to understand the conversation, left on the side, Lisa and the girls stood up, sensing the unusual atmosphere.
"Don't do anything rash! Tia will stop you if you're plotting something!"
With lightning erupting from her horns, Tia glared at Vritra.
"Yggdrasil's core huh... Indeed, in front of thee, control of my dark matter would be wrested away, however... 'Tis a separate matter for *things that are already created*."
The room suddenly dimmed. Something was blocking the starlight.
"If 'tis necessary to fight ye, I only need to engage using a physical vessel whose transmutation is complete. Just like the time when using Hekatonkheir to challenge Yggdrasil."
Strong wind blew in from the window, causing the frame to shake nonstop. Small items inside the room also began to fly.
With long black hair fluttering in the wind, Vritra smiled proudly.
"A human body is truly inconvenient, requiring rest no matter what."
"Eh...?"
After hearing what Vritra said, Tia's expression instantly froze.
"Hast thou not realized? Though only for a brief moment, thou dozed off just now. Hence, seizing that opening, I created a *stand-in capable of fighting without relying on dark matter*."
A giant dragon's head appeared outside the window. Its body was covered in a black exterior resembling armor. The opened jaws were lined with rows of sharp teeth.

Blowing into the room in place of the night breeze was the dragon's warm breath.
"What—"
While everyone was shocked by the scene, Vritra jumped out of the window into the dragon's mouth.
"Tia will protect Kili!"
Tia spread her arms and stood in front of Kili, trying to defend her.
"I shan't show any mercy if you wish to fight!"
Lisa and Firill summoned their fictional armaments and stood on guard at Tia's left and right.
"You..."
Seeing Tia and the others defending her, Kili looked quite surprised.
Standing in the dragon's mouth, Vritra looked at them and laughed as though she found things ludicrous.
"Ye seem to be mistaken. I have no intention of taking my daughter away. Now that the second generation is born, 'tis not necessary for me to obsess over one mate."
"...What do you mean?"
Firill frowned and asked. Vritra simply shrugged.
"Meaning that to me, rather than the targeted D, priority goeth to the existence capable of exterminating the second generation."
Displaying a smile on the corners of her lips, Vritra issued her declaration.
The dragon's giant jaws immediately clamped shut.
Swallowing Vritra's girl form, the black dragon flapped its gigantic wings.
"Freeze!"
Ignoring Tia's command, the dragon stand-in flew into the starry sky.
"Move aside—Laevateinn!"
Kili leaned forward from behind Tia and fired a red heat beam at the distant black dragon.
However, the black dragon swerved and dodged the beam, rising in altitude and speed.
"Where does Vritra intend to go!?"
"The existence capable of exterminating the second generation... That might be referring to Mitsuki who can use antimatter."
Firill answered Lisa's question. Listening to their conversation, Kili nodded in agreement.
"That has to be it. She chose her direction without hesitation... She must have placed some kind of marker on Yuu and the others. We must give chase now, Tia! Her dark matter must be sealed away, or else Yuu and the others will be at a severe disadvantage!"
"O-Okay!"
Tia nodded frantically in response to Kili, but just as the two of them were about to jump out the window, Lisa called them back.

"Please wait! If Vritra is heading to Mitsuki-san at the NIFL base, Kili-san will be in danger if she goes. I will stay behind with her as her bodyguard. Tia-san and Firill-san, you chase Vritra together!"
"...Let's go, Tia."
Firill extended her hand with a serious expression.
"Got it!"
Tia held Firill's hand. Summoning their fictional armaments, they jumped out the window to chase the black dragon.
After watching Vritra and the girls leave, Kili turned her gaze to Lisa beside her.
"To think I would be under your protection—What an unbelievable feeling. Aren't you afraid to be alone with me after I almost killed you last time?"
"...I am certainly not afraid. Moreover, I do not consider myself weaker than you are."
Lisa turned her face away and answered in displeasure.
"Oh dear, that really doesn't sound like words that should be coming from someone who was completely helpless against me."
"I simply did not have the mental preparation and skills to fight humans at the time. Now—I am different. After losing to you, I came to understand... In order to protect those I wish to protect, there are times when I must fight things other than dragons."
After saying this, Lisa looked out the window.
"Oh... So even if NIFL's special forces attack, you'll help me get rid of them?"
"Indeed. No matter what kind of entity comes, I will protect you. You can rest assured on this fact."
Kili felt disappointed that her sarcastic question was answered by Lisa so confidently.
"...How arrogant."
Sighing deeply, Kili shifted her gaze away uncomfortably.

Part 2

'—Because of that, her target is most likely Mitsuki-san.'
After meeting up with Shinomiya-sensei, Iris and the others, we listened to Lisa's report while walking along the corridor inside the base.
With every explosion, the building would shake, causing small fragments of construction materials to fall from the ceiling. Iris and Ren would cower every time whereas Ariella and Shinomiya-sensei gazed at the ceiling with grave expressions. Displayed on a portable terminal's screen, Lisa was also watching us in worry.
"Then the monster currently attacking this base is truly 'Black' Vritra..."
'Indeed. If Tia-san and Firill-san caught up, they should be engaged in combat currently. Judging from the fact that Vritra went straight for your location, she probably has Mitsuki-san's position completely in her grasp.'
Listening to Lisa, I observed Mitsuki's body. Vritra had probably placed some kind of marking on Mitsuki somehow, but it was impossible to tell what it was.
Shinomiya-sensei also seemed like she had concluded it was too difficult to remove Mitsuki's marking. With a serious demeanor, she issued orders.
"Regarding your hiding of Vritra, I will pursue the matter later. Since our position is known to the enemy, it's better to go outside first. It is impossible to handle Vritra's attacks indoors. Mononobe Mitsuki—Are you able to construct your fictional armament?"
Shinomiya-sensei asked Mitsuki in a serious tone of voice.
"—I shall try."
Mitsuki nodded and generated dark matter on her palm. The black dark matter reacted to Mitsuki's will and changed in shape.
"It is done..."
Mitsuki exhaled in relief, showing the bow-shaped fictional armament to Shinomiya-sensei.
The fictional armament that had collapsed when confronting Kraken Zwei was currently very stable. Learning that Mitsuki had not suffered mental trauma that would prevent her from fighting again, I breathed a sigh of relief.
"Excellent. Mononobe Mitsuki will focus on self-defense after leaving the building. Ariella Lu, you will serve as her bodyguard. Mononobe Yuu, Iris Freyja and Ren Miyazawa, the three of you will support Tia Lightning and Firill Crest who are possibly engaged in combat with Vritra right now."

After confirming Mitsuki's condition, Shinomiya-sensei issued battle orders eloquently.
"Affirmative!"
After we nodded, Shinomiya-sensei stopped walking where the corridor turned a corner.
"I will tell NIFL not to get in your way. Since Kraken Zwei has destroyed all the drones, their remaining combat forces will only be a hindrance. If anything comes up later, contact me on the communicator." As Shinomiya-sensei made her way to the NIFL command center, we parted ways with her, put on our communicators and exited the base.
Instantly, wind carrying heat and a burnt smell blew from above.
I looked up to see a series of dark-red explosions in the air. The noise heard earlier was probably caused by those explosions.
A survey of the surroundings showed that the airstrip and the forest were already on fire, but the buildings in the base seemed undamaged.
A fireball descending from the sky was blocked by some kind of invisible barrier, exploding in the air.
"...Onii-chan, look over there."
Ren tugged my clothing and pointed at the sky. There was a girl hovering in midair.
"That's—Firill."
Ariella squinted and remarked.
"What about Tia-chan and Vritra-chan?"
"Probably on the other side of the barrier."
Iris looked around and asked. I answered.
The stars shining brightly in the night sky were occasionally blocked by what seemed to be some kind of massive shadow. Then there was a small red dot of light, flying as though in pursuit of the shadow. That red light probably came from Tia's fictional armament.
"Anyway, let's tell Firill and Tia we are here as reinforcements. I'll join in with barrier construction. Ren, generate illumination."
"Mm."
Ren followed Ariella's instructions and raised her hammer-shaped fictional armament to the sky.
A gigantic block of dark matter manifested in the air above, giving off dazzling brightness like a sun, illuminating Firill's figure in the sky clearly. The black dragon flying in the sky also came into view.
Although smaller than the dragon that had appeared over Nanato City this morning, I could sense outstanding mobility from this more refined body. The sharp curves all over its body were strongly aggressive.
This was most likely Vritra's new stand-in.
According to Lisa, Vritra's girl form was apparently swallowed by the black dragon. Abandoning the stand-in used to communicate with Tia, Vritra had chosen a form created for combat.
—So mutual understanding was impossible after all?

Feeling frustrated and a little sad, I clenched my fist tightly.
Vritra's black dragon form circled at high speed in the air, spewing flames towards us. A silhouette, looking like Tia, was chasing after Vritra, but could not keep up with her movements.
"Deploy wind barrier."
Seeing the situation, Ariella raised her gauntlet-shaped fictional armament. My skin could feel wind rising towards the sky, probably reinforcing the barrier protecting the base.
"Mitsuki!"
Noticing us, Firill descended.
"—Firill-san, we have already heard what transpired from Lisa-san. That shadow flying in the sky is Vritra, right?" Standing in front of our group, Mitsuki confirmed with the landing Firill.
"Yes, although Tia is chasing her, preventing her from using dark matter... She can fly and discharge flames. Wounds are also healed rapidly... It's insane."
Firill answered in a bitter tone of voice.
"In other words, those flames are produced through biological structure rather than transmutation..."
Mitsuki gasped and looked up at the fireballs exploding against the barrier of air above.
"It's almost like... a classic dragon that appears in fairy tales. Taking a living organism's combat power to the limit, so this form is the result."
Ariella looked up at the illuminated sky and commented.
"However, if dark matter can't be used, then it's *just a living organism*."
While everyone was shocked, Ren pointed out calmly. After hearing what she said, my mind calmed down too.
"That's right... In fact, Vritra's flames are blocked by the air barrier completely. It's not that scary an opponent if we fight calmly."
"Indeed, it'll be over as soon as we can land a powerful attack."
Ariella agreed with me but Firill still showed a stiff expression.
"...Will it be that easy?"
"Is something bothering you?"
Firill replied hesitantly to Mitsuki's question:
"Perhaps it is my imagination... But Vritra's body seems to be growing larger gradually. Her flying speed also seems to be increasing... I don't think we can lower our guard."
"...Vritra should be aware of the disadvantage of not being able to use dark matter. Added to the fact that she created this body for the sake of eliminating Mitsuki—She might be hiding some kind of trump card."
After listening to Firill's worries, I brought my hand to the side of my mouth and said.
"Even so, our only choice is to fight. I will take charge of defense. Firill and Ren, go support Tia."

After speaking in a strong tone of voice, Ariella handed a communicator to Firill.
"Unable to fly, Mononobe-kun and Iris will attack from the ground. But it would be problematic when attacking unless we stay in contact using communicators, because we need to avoid the line of fire or release the barrier."
"I got it."
After we all nodded, Ariella, Firill and Ren flew into the sky.
"Mitsuki, you should focus on protecting yourself."
After reminding Mitsuki worriedly, Firill flew towards Vritra.
Left on the ground were Iris, Mitsuki and me, the three of us.
"...Is it too late to talk to her?"
Iris asked quietly.
"This wouldn't have happened if she seriously wanted to talk to us."
I recalled my chagrin from just now and answered.
"...Yeah."
Iris concurred with sadness on her face.
"You don't want to fight Vritra?"
"No, because we went out together... Eating ice cream, I thought we could understand each other..."
Seeing the battle intensify in the sky after Firill and the others joined in, Iris spoke ruefully.
"—If Kraken Zwei hadn't shown up, perhaps that could've happened."
After exhaling a heavy breath, I said.
Although I felt the same way as Iris, the current situation no longer allowed for peaceful resolutions.
"Although Vritra's objective is still unknown, there's no doubt she intends to create Ds as mates for dragons. And right now, a mate for the Kraken's child has appeared. As a result, I guess Vritra no longer feels it's necessary to reconcile with Yggdrasil."
My answer was intended for Iris, but Mitsuki looked down sadly next to us.
"In other words, had I used antimatter to eliminate Kraken Zwei... This would not have happened."
"What? No, it's not your fault, Mitsuki. Besides, Vritra is ultimately the cause and beginning of everything. Also, Kraken Zwei awakened because of Yggdrasil's electrical interference, causing the cooling systems to stop functioning—"
"Even so, I am still responsible. At the very least, by my own hand, Vritra must be..."
Mitsuki raised her fictional armament of a bow with heavy thoughts on her face.
"Hold on, Mitsuki, you should protect yourself just as Firill said. Leave the attacking to us."
I stopped Mitsuki and shifted my gaze to the sky.
In the sky, white from Ren's flare, everyone was counterattacking Vritra.

Explosions and flashes of light kept happening. Vritra stopped attacking us and flew faster, probably to focus on evasion.
"So fast... And such irregular movements, impossible to predict. It looks like she prioritized mobility because she could not use dark matter."
No matter what level of armor or regeneration ability, we all possessed enough offensive power to take out Vritra in one hit. Since defense was impossible, allocating power to evasion was a perfectly logical solution.
"I cannot aim at such a fast target. If Firill-san and the others do not halt Vritra's movements for me, attacking would be difficult."
Mitsuki apparently still intended to attack, but after seeing Vritra's excessively fast movements, she lowered the bow.
"But... What is Vritra-chan doing? Just dodging won't win..."
Iris still seemed hesitant to fight Vritra, asking with a worried expression.
I was asking the same question in my mind. Even though defenses could be compensated by mobility, undeniably, she was decidedly lacking in attack power. However, I noticed a certain change while tracking Vritra's figure flying in the air.
"...What Firill observed just now was not her imagination. Vritra's body is definitely changing."
Rather than increasing in size, it was more like the outline—the shape itself—was gradually changing.
And accompanying that change, her flying speed was gradually increasing. I had a bad premonition when I saw Firill and the others being left behind, unable to catch up.
Because I realized another advantage to prioritizing mobility.
Evading the girls' pursuit, Vritra breathed fire at the flare floating in the sky. Unlike earlier fireballs, the firepower approached Kili's heat beams. A powerful strike.
The flare was eliminated by the fire, returning the night sky to darkness. Due to the surroundings suddenly dimming, we lost sight of Vritra's gigantic black body for an instant.
"Nii-san, Vritra is there!"
Mitsuki found Vritra faster than me and pointed at the sky.
Vritra was rising rapidly as though aiming for the top of the heavens.
There were three small dots of light from fictional armaments—Tia, Firill and Ren were chasing Vritra, but Vritra pulled ahead in an instant.
"So Vritra... never gave up on using dark matter."
"Huh? What's going on? Mononobe?"
Listening to my mutters, Iris cocked her head in puzzlement.
"Yggdrasil's interference against dark matter is limited in range. Even if Tia is using its power, there will still be a limit. Vritra is probably using high mobility to escape from Tia's interference range."
"B-But there's no way to attack after escaping that far way."
"There are many ways, such as—"

Judging from the fact that Vritra had flown upwards, an image flashed in my mind.
But in the next instant, that image turned into reality.
The stars in the night sky—disappeared.
It was a gigantic rock blotting the sky, obscuring many light sources.
The scene felt almost like the moon was crashing down.
"Me... teor...?"
Iris said blankly.
"Attacking by bringing down a gigantic mass... As expected from 'Black' Vritra, her black matter generating capacity is on a completely different level from ours."
With a stiff expression, Mitsuki looked up at the enormous mass covering the sky.
"...I'm going to use Catastrophe to erase it! Everyone hurry back!"
Using the communicator, Iris called to her classmates in the sky.
'—Understood! All of us have retreated from directly above! You're free to fire any time!'
Ariella's voice could be heard over the communicator. Iris immediately summoned the red staff of light and raised it to the sky.
"O Catastrophe! Actualize!"
The red beam shot straight up the sky.
The pillar of time-stealing light expanded radially, engulfing the entire giant meteor.
Compared to what she had used against Kraken Zwei, her output had increased further.
Enveloped in red light, the meteor's surface gradually turned into dust and broke off, but the meteor was too massive, or perhaps made of a durable material, the rate of weathering was quite slow.
"Mononobe! There isn't enough time at this rate!"
Iris called out urgently. At this moment, Tia and the girls returned.
"Yuu! Vritra is using the meteor as a shield to approach us!"
Tia landed and spoke while panting. Electricity was sparking around her red horns. Most likely, Tia was currently expanding the range of electrical interference.
"—After reducing the meteor's mass using Iris-san's Catastrophe, I will destroy it using antimatter. Nii-san, please construct an anti-dragon armament to aim and fire at Vritra."
Mitsuki raised her fictional armament with a tense expression.
"Are you able to shoot, Mitsuki?"
Firill asked in worry. Mitsuki nodded with an expression befitting the captain of the Counter-Dragon Squad.
"Do not worry, because the enemy is a dragon this time."
In other words, she was hinting that she regarded Kraken Zwei as human, but no one would go out of their way to pursue this matter at the moment.

"Then Firill and I will get ready to deploy a barrier any time. Ren, lend dark matter to Mononobe-kun."
"Mm."
Ren nodded in response to Ariella and held my left hand firmly.
"I can't... continue anymore."
Iris spoke painfully. The red staff's outline began to fade and the brightness weakened.
Even that Basilisk that possessed the same ability had a limit in how long it could fire Catastrophe at full power. Similarly, Iris had her own limit.
"Ren, we're up."
I gripped Ren's hand in return and started to construct an anti-dragon armament.
"Marduk—main cannon, Babel!"
Given Vritra's mobility, it would be very hard to hit using the projectile-based Megiddo. Babel's ability to generate a wide-area supergravitational discontinuity had a higher chance of capturing her.
Through transmutation, the gigantic weapon with the barrel split into two was constructed. During this time, Iris' Catastrophe finally vanished.
"I'm counting on everyone... for the rest."
Iris collapsed, sitting on the ground while breathing heavily.
Weathered by the red light, the meteor was reduced to less than half its original volume.
"Leave it to me—Terminating Arrow, Last Quark!"
Mitsuki immediately fired an arrow of antimatter.
An explosion then turned the sky white.
A brief moment after the gigantic noise of the explosion, a strong gust of wind blew.
Holding Ren's hand tightly, I narrowed my eyes and kept my gaze on the sky.
"—She's coming."
Breaking through the meteor's explosion, a giant outline descended at high speed.
It was Vritra—However, her form had undergone even greater changes.
From the gaps in the black exterior, blue-white light was leaking out.
Propelled by blue flames, the body had a long tail extended from the back.
"Fire!"
I locked onto the target and ordered the pre-civilization weapon to attack, determined to make a guaranteed kill.
Gwon—An eerie noise of spatial distortion could be heard.
The black torrent rushing out of the anti-dragon armament spread far and wide, about to devour Vritra.
What looked black was a supergravitational discontinuity, even capable of sucking in light, impossible to escape once captured, leaving only the fate of getting crushed.
Nevertheless—

"She dodged!?"
Ariella cried out in surprise.
Using flames discharged from the body, Vritra forcefully changed directions and evaded the supergravitational zone.
"Gah..."
I operated the turret to follow Vritra's movements but could not lock onto her while she was flying irregularly at high speed.
During this time, the light leaking from Vritra's body continued to brighten.
"No way..."
Mitsuki gasped.
"What's wrong?"
Firill's question prompted Mitsuki to continue hoarsely:
"Since Vritra was spewing flames earlier, there must be some kind of energy source inside the body. Perhaps Vritra has caused that energy to go out of control, intending to turn herself into a bomb..."
"How can—"
Firill showed shock on her face.
—If Mitsuki's deductions were correct, then we must not approach Vritra no matter what.
The turret began to shake nonstop.
Although I was using a supergravitational zone to attack Vritra, the turret finally reached its limit and exploded.
Installed inside the barrel, the lenses shattered.
The output weakened and the turret stopped moving. Vritra instantly descended straight upon us.
—Just as Mitsuki said, Vritra intended to self-destruct!?
To Vritra, this body was probably the same as Hekatonkheir, something disposable.
I recalled the image of Yggdrasil's disappearance from the Germany-Denmark border region. The gigantic crater in the ground was created by self-destructing Hekatonkheir and getting Yggdrasil caught in the blast.
Even with Ariella and the girls, it was probably impossible to defend completely against an explosion of that scale.
—What to do?
I looked around at everyone while pondering.
Iris' Catastrophe might be able to weather the explosion itself, but she had currently exhausted her power, unable to move even if she wanted to. Then in this situation, the way to save everyone was to—
"Ren, lend me all of your dark matter!"
I abandoned Babel and summoned my own fictional armament.
"Mm, got it."
Despite showing anxiety on her face, Ren still nodded.
The fictional armament in the form of an ornamental gun—Siegfried. Using Ren's dark matter, I enlarged it.
I aimed the muzzle at the sky.

Vritra descended rapidly, her body glowing a dangerous blue. The internal energy source was most likely approaching critical.
"Mononobe!"
Iris screamed as Vritra's body expanded together with the light.
"Don't worry, I won't let anyone die no matter what!"
Having received Ren's dark matter, my fictional armament reached its limit. I turned all of the dark matter into a single bullet and shot it.
For the sake of protecting everyone—For the sake of not losing precious people!
"Antigravity!!"
The dark matter bullet transmuted into antigravitational matter, glowing white.
Whether Vritra or the explosion, everything was pushed towards the sky!
Vritra exploded together with the blue-white light expanding within her body. It was a torrent of overwhelming energy, enough to color the sky and the ground completely white.
However, instead of reaching the ground, the explosion was pushed back to the sky.
I had created a powerful repulsive field that even distorted light. Hence, the explosion's white light seemed to be covered by a pitch-black and invisible domain.
Soundless—
Rejecting light, sound and all energy, our death and termination was denied.
"GOOOOOOOOOOOO—!!"
After the antigravitational matter shattered and a gigantic ripple passed through space—The stars returned to the sky.
None of the explosion's wake could be seen anymore. Neither were there any signs of Vritra.
"Huff, huff..."
Totally tired out, I panted heavily. Having passed all her dark matter to me, Ren also seemed utterly exhausted. Her shoulders kept heaving up and down.
"Onii-chan... Success?"
"Yeah—I think."
After I nodded in confirmation, Ren immediately sat down on the ground.
"—We won, Mononobe-kun!"
"Mononobe-kun, good work."
Firill cheered and Ariella breathed a sigh of relief.
"Looks like complete annihilation..."
Not lowering her guard, Mitsuki looked at the sky and remarked softly.
"Vritra-chan..."
However, Iris was looking a bit mournfully at the sky. This was probably a sad ending for her. Gloomy feelings also occupied my heart.

Just as I took a breath, intending to say something to Iris, Tia cried out shrilly.
"Yuu! It's not over yet!"
Pointing behind me, Tia had apparently noticed something.
I looked back, only to see a petite figure approaching us
"!?"
No way—!?
With long black hair fluttering freely in the wind, the new arrival's face was very similar to Kili's.
That was... Vritra's girl form!
Wearing a black one-piece dress, she dashed straight towards Mitsuki.
Intense intent to murder was conveyed through her eyes.
Vritra had not abandoned her human stand-in.
Most likely, she had used an opening during the battle to separate from the black dragon's body.
Hearing Tia's cry, Mitsuki looked back too but did not have enough time to generate dark matter for transmutation.
A chill ran along my spine. A sense of anxiety instantly manifested, far surpassing what I would feel in a crisis of my own. Subconsciously, it moved my body.
"Mitsuki!"
I grabbed Mitsuki's hand and pulled her towards me.
While charging, Vritra swung her hand through the air.
"Tch!?"
Mitsuki cried out briefly.
Perhaps scratched by Vritra's fingernails, shallow lacerations appeared on Mitsuki's arm.
Seeping out from the wound was—fresh blood.
Instantly, my heart was filled with murderous intent against the *enemy* that had harmed Mitsuki.
Against Vritra who was in *human* form, Fafnir in the depths of my subconscious bared its fangs.
—Kill her.
With unprecedented acuity, my body put that thought into action. After exchanging positions with Mitsuki, I extended my hand to stab Vritra's throat.
"—!"
Vritra stopped urgently and jumped back, escaping my attack.
Pulling back some distance away, Vritra faced off against me.
Due to the increased separation, my mind could slacken somewhat. An image of Vritra eating ice cream flashed through my mind.
—I thought we could understand each other...
Iris' words rang in my ear.
Those words slammed on the brakes of my body that originally wanted to follow up the attack.

"Stop this... Vritra."
Suppressing my surging murderous intent with rationality, I spoke sharply at her.
"Asking me to stop? Thou still seekest dialogue?"
Vritra asked me with a wry smile.
"No, I'm asking you to surrender. You have no chance of winning anymore."
I motioned with my eyes to my classmates. Iris and the others recovered from their initial shock and raised their fictional armaments, ready for combat.
"Tia won't let you transmute again or create a new stand-in!"
Tia's horns erupted with electricity while she glared at Vritra.
The situation was clearly not in her favor. Having lost the black dragon stand-in, there was no reason how Vritra could defeat us. Furthermore—
"Vritra, having lost that stand-in... Can you remain safe?"
"What?"
Hearing my question, Vritra's eyebrow twitched.
"Stand-ins like that black dragon just now or Hekatonkheir, you could probably make as many of them as you want. But all living creatures must have some kind of main body or core."
"....."
Vritra answered with silence, so I continued:
"Rather than to conduct a sneak attack, the reason why you left the self-destructing black dragon's body was to protect this body... To protect your current main body, right? If that's the case, stop fighting. I don't want to kill you."
"......Kuku."
Vritra's shoulders shook slightly then she laughed, unable to contain herself.
"Haha—don't want to kill me? Indeed, this stand-in is my current core, however... The connected main body existeth in a higher dimension. And the coordinates for that—Unable to perceive higher dimensions, ye cannot destroy me completely."
A different dimension... That was probably where dark matter existed.
Dark matter's form was determined according to the will of the one who generated it. It was matter of a higher dimension whose coordinates were believed to belong to an axis of the "mind."
—It was possible that Vritra was the existence with the greatest proximity to dark matter.
If that was the case, what we saw of Vritra was merely a portion projected onto this three-dimensional world. A glimpse of her full appearance was impossible.
Hence, even if Ds could bring dark matter over from the other side, they still could not head over to where dark matter was located.
Perhaps Vritra's expression of confidence stemmed from knowledge of this fact, but I still had a trump card.

"Is it impossible, even for my anti-dragon armament—capable of preventing Hekatonkheir's restoration temporarily?"
"—!"
The smile vanished from Vritra's face.
"That was the weapon Yggdrasil gave me to fight Hekatonkheir—to fight you. Precisely because it could reach your main body, which exists in a higher dimension, that's why Hekatonkheir couldn't revive, right? Please tell me, even if your main body suffers that kind of attack... Will you still be fine?"
Hearing my words, Vritra's expression froze.
Our gazes met. The air was thick with tension. The first to break this tense atmosphere was Vritra.
"……Hoo."
Vritra sighed deeply and lowered her head.
"Thou art... Truly contemptible. It appeareth that I ought to be more aware of my disadvantageous position and existing crisis."
"Are you willing to surrender?"
I asked cautiously but—Looking up, Vritra showed a smile.
"Yes, I shall consider it. Nevertheless, mine objective is already accomplished—Irregular."
"...What?"
Confronting her at a separation of several meters, I could not help but frown.
At this moment, I heard a heavy thud behind me.
"Mitsuki-chan!?"
"Mitsuki!?"
Next, I heard Iris and Firill crying out in surprise.
I looked back in trepidation, only to see Mitsuki collapsed on the ground. Blood was dripping from her wound where Vritra had scratched her arm lightly just now.
"Know what this is?"
Vritra lifted her palm and asked me. There was a black liquid stuck to her fingernails.
"……"
I could not answer a single word. Looking at Mitsuki collapsed on the ground, my thoughts could not operate as normal.
"This is the blood of the black dragon ye fought. When creating that stand-in, I imbued its blood with poison."
"Poison...?"
Vritra's words shook my eardrums. I understood the situation.
Fingernails, scratches, poison... Just now—
"I designed this to counterattack ye, but due to hindrance from wind during the battle, there was no opportunity to use it. But thanks to that, none of ye noticed until the poison took total effect."
Vritra smiled while she spoke.

I realized I had failed to protect Mitsuki.
Under such circumstances, Vritra would not be using half-baked poison.
I slowly faced Vritra, only to see her nodding smugly, showing off her poison-laced hand:
"With this, the second generation's chances of survival is greatly increased. The plan will reach fruition without further action from me."
Vritra seemed to be saying something, but my brain could not process those words. My mind gave up on thinking.
My heart turned blank. Empty and hollow, my heart was hurting sharply.
Before wrath and sorrow filled the emptiness in my heart and soul, a certain being gradually took control of my heart.
"Art thou listening? Irregular? No matter, might as well take another two or three people to—"
I could not understand the prey's voice. There was even no point in understanding either.
Because what stood before my eyes was of human appearance.
Even against an imitation, so long as the opponent was human—Fafnir was the absolute predator.
I took a step forward.
At the same time, I generated dark matter in my right hand.
Second step.
Vritra's expression froze slightly.
However, she did not move. I transmuted the dark matter into a metal knife.
Third step. I had already reached attack range.
Only then did Vritra finally attempt to back away but it was too late.
Everything happened so slowly.
No—Was it my consciousness that had accelerated overwhelmingly?
I swung the knife.
Vritra jumped backwards. My knife grazed her throat lightly.
Her face was distorted in pain and shock.
"The stand-in's agony... Why would it transmit to—"
Vritra uttered meaningless words while I took another step towards her.
This distance was within reach of the knife—Fafnir's fang.
Next was the lethal blow.
"Human body, trembling... This is—"
Vritra's voice was mixed with fear.
I knew where the fang ought to stab.
Fafnir's keen sense of smell had detected the vital spot that must be struck to extinguish life.
I was going to give her the same fate as Mitsuki.
Absolutely unforgivable—Absolutely unacceptable.
You, who killed Mitsuki, I absolutely won't allow you to live!
"Mayhap 'tis the scrapped eighth—"
The target continued to emit worthless noise from the depths of her mouth.

Using the knife in my hand, I made a casual thrust towards Vritra who was staring wide-eyed.
I understood instinctively rather than relying on intellect.
If I pierced this point, she was going to die.
Neither the heart nor the brain, this part was the core of the stand-in.
Despite a human guise, she was not a human existence.
However, Fafnir would treat her as a human and kill her, destroy her.
The sharp blade entered Vritra's mouth, aiming straight at the depths of her throat—
"No! Mononobe—!!"
A scream.
Cracks appeared in my accelerated consciousness.
It was Iris' voice.
About to pierce Vritra's spine through her mouth, the knife stopped due to Iris' cry.
Because her voice had significance.
Equal in value as Mitsuki's voice—
With the knife inserted in her mouth, Vritra was staring up at me with a shocked expression.
"...Iris?"
"Mitsuki-chan is still breathing! If Vritra-chan is the one who made the poison, she might know how to counteract the poison! So—"
Hearing what Iris was saying, I recovered normal thinking capacity.
Mitsuki was still alive—
In that case, what I should be doing now was finding a way to save Mitsuki, not vengeance.
I withdrew the knife, all covered in saliva, from Vritra's mouth. She instantly collapsed, sitting on the ground.
"Ah..."
Vritra showed a dazed expression, staring at me with hollow eyes.
"Tia won't let you do as you please anymore!"
Immediately, Tia created vines from dark matter, wrapping them around Vritra's body.
Even with her body tightly restrained by vines, Vritra still did not react. She remained frozen in shock, her body trembling slightly.
"Now you won't be able to do transmutation even when Tia isn't watching you."
These vines were probably something like Yggdrasil's terminal. I bent down in front of Vritra who was imprisoned by vines and spoke in a deep voice:
"Vritra."
Hearing my call, originally in a trance, Vritra showed wavering in her expression.
"F-Fufu..."
Vritra's eyes showed the glint of willpower again. She laughed stiffly. I suppressed my surging wrath towards her and said:

"Tell me if there is a way to counteract Mitsuki's poison."
"—Thou thinkest I will disclose it?"
Vritra asked sarcastically in return.
"If you don't speak, I will kill you. I will use anti-dragon armaments to exterminate you together with the main body residing in a higher dimension."
I threatened Vritra seriously.
But after hearing what I said, Vritra's expression simply froze for a moment then she suddenly burst out laughing.
"Haha—thou speakest of anti-dragon armaments? Thou clearly hast no need of that... Unbelievable, dost thou not know what thou was attempting just now?"
"...What do you mean?"
While I was perplexed, Vritra looked up at me in delight then said calmly:
"'Tis death I felt just now. I am the one who wisheth to ask: Art thou unaware of that power?"
"That power? Don't tell me you're referring to my Fafnir..."
Just now, I was definitely certain I could kill Vritra, but Fafnir had already sunk into the bottom of my subconscious. That certainty now felt as far away as a dream.
"Fafnir—Is that so? Since that name hath been mentioned, there must be no mistake. Appearing before thee in this form was apparently a fatal mistake."
Vritra figured things out on her own and sighed deeply.
"What do you know about Fafnir—"
"I have no obligation to tell thee. Since that scrapped authority lingereth and thou possessest it... Mayhap thou art the most troublesome enemy to me."
With clear hostility burning in her eyes, Vritra glared sharply at me.
"...Then forget it. Right now, I just want to ask how Mitsuki's poison can be counteracted."
"Patience. Thou needst not worry about her."
Turning her gaze to the collapsed Mitsuki, Vritra shrugged.
"What?"
"She will simply sleep for a couple days."
I gasped at what Vritra said.
"You only put her to sleep? But why—"
I asked with my gaze—Why didn't you kill her?
"Because 'tis sufficient. There is no need to reduce the number of valuable Ds. Everything will end while she sleepeth."
Vritra smiled confident despite the vines restraining her.
"...!"
Ariella suddenly sat down, holding her stomach.
"Did you get hurt somewhere, Ariella?"
"I-I didn't get hurt, but the dragon mark area suddenly started stinging—"
...Dragon mark?

My heart began to pound after I heard Ariella's answer.
"Ow..."
Immediately after Ariella, Iris and Ren also pressed their hands against parts of their bodies. Iris was holding her flank, the location of her dragon mark. Ren was in pain, pressing her hands against the vicinity of her chest.
If that was the location of her dragon mark—
I approached Mitsuki with suspicions in my mind. Mitsuki's dragon mark should be on her neck, covered by her long hair.
I knelt down next to Mitsuki, who was sleeping due to Vritra's poison. Nervously, I lifted her hair. From the gaps between that sleek and soft hair, I saw—Her dragon mark was starting to turn purple.
"What..."
While I was reeling back in shock, the girls nearby also lamented:
"Mononobe! My dragon mark!"
"My dragon mark changed color."
"...Onii-chan, me too."
Iris, Ariella and Ren confirmed the color change in their dragon marks, going pale in the face.
"—Fufu."
Suggestive laughter.
I looked back to see Vritra, imprisoned by vines, her shoulders shaking from laughter.
"Like my daughter, ye fought her, did ye not? Then this is inevitable. All goeth according to my designs. 'Tis precisely the second generation's power."
"What the heck is going on? Explain clearly!"
I questioned the excited Vritra in a sharp tone of voice.
Grinning, she replied as though gloating about her victory:
"A second-generation hybrid dragon is capable of turning all Ds into mates. All of your dragon marks will be changing in color presently, without exception—Every single one of you."

Part 3

In the mountains a few dozen kilometers away from the NIFL base where Mononobe Yuu and the others were...
A vast desert had suddenly appeared in the forest. There was a great hole in the middle of the desert, with pieces of mithril blocking the opening. At the bottom of the buried hole, Kraken Zwei was immobilized.
Wrapped in a cocoon of mithril hair, there was no worry of getting crushed to death. However, buried in fine sand created from the weathering of the surroundings, digging out from the side was impossible because the grains of sand were too small, preventing the creation of a tunnel.
The mithril pieces had completely blocked off the hole even if she wanted to moving upwards to escape.
But after several attempts, Kraken Zwei realized that eliminating the mithril was the fastest way to escape. Mithril was theoretically the hardest alloy, a challenge to crush or slice. However, Kraken Zwei's hair was also made of mithril.
There was a term known as the cutting of steel.
It was a technique using a steel blade to slice through steel. In other words, depending on how a weapon was forged and used, it was possible to slice through the same material.
Naturally, a newborn monster could not possibly know of such a principle.
Yet even so, the monster sensed it instinctively.
—She could do it.
Hence, Kraken Zwei wove her hair into a blade for obtaining freedom.
A powerful impulse was driving the monster's actions.
She must go outside.
Because there were things she desired—

Epilogue

"Hello, Major Loki."
Tokyo—the First Laboratory of Asgard's Far East branch. Fully lit despite the middle of the night, its premises had many NIFL military vehicles parked there. Walking out from a large trailer, Loki Jotunheim was greeted by a man in a lab coat.
"…Director Miyazawa?"
Loki sighed after realizing the one approaching him was the lab's director, Miyazawa Kenya, then turned around to face him.
"I heard rumors that your unit... Sleipnir, if I do recall? They apparently failed to take down Kraken Zwei."
Seeing Miyazawa Kenya speak in such a delighted mood, Loki grinned sarcastically.
"Are you that happy that the research subject survived? Indeed, just as you said, Sleipnir failed. Assassination is possible on a first encounter with the enemy, but someone unexpected interfered."
"Interfered?"
Miyazawa's question prompted the image of a girl, who used to be a Sleipnir member, to flash across Loki's mind.
After getting kidnapped by Kili and deserting the team, Jeanne Hortensia had unbelievably gone on to act in such a way.
"The one in Kraken Zwei's company stopped Sleipnir."
"Ahhh... You mean the young man who had invaded the lab. Back then, Kraken Zwei *apparently left to chase after him*…"
Young man—Miyazawa Kenya apparently took the crossdressing Jeanne for a guy, but Loki did not bother correcting this mistake and continued the subject.
"—Thanks to him leading Kraken Zwei away, Tokyo's urban areas were spared from serious damage. A leak of information was also avoided. However, he obstructed our operation at a critical moment, causing us to miss the ideal opportunity."
Loki made a bitter expression and continued:
"Kraken Zwei is currently difficult to deal with. Although higher-ups sought aid from Midgard, the team of Ds only managed to immobilize it. The extermination failed."
"Team of Ds—"
Miyazawa Kenya brought his hand to his lips.

"Worried about your daughter?"
Loki's question brought a subtle change to Miyazawa Kenya's expression.
"...Looks like you've been looking into my matters. However, I am not worrying about her. Neither do I have the right to worry about her."
Miyazawa Kenya shook his head in denial with an expression of resignation.
"I see, then there's not much value in telling you this—But I'll still pass the information along. Your daughter is safe and sound."
"Then I still have to thank you. Thank you for letting me know, Major Loki. By the way, how is your Fafnir… Mononobe Yuu?"
Loki's eyebrow twitched slightly.
"Just recently, I chanced upon this term, Fafnir, so I investigated you slightly. I never expected you to be related to him."
Miyazawa Kenya spoke in a flippant tone of voice. Loki glared sharply at him.
"—What the hell do you know?"
"Nothing much. From my position, simply tracking personnel assignments is already the limit, but… I am able to deduce many things by piecing together various fragments of hearsay."
Miyazawa Kenya answered suggestively.
"Mononobe Yuu, belonging to the special forces team Sleipnir, codename 'Fafnir'—By the way, what relation does he have with that Fafnir Project?"
"....."
Loki did not answer a single word. His aura turned dangerous.
"Fafnir is a name appearing in Norse mythology. I remember the word means 'embracer,' doesn't it? What he embraced was gold. Fighting over gold, many lost their lives, but humans were the only ones who saw value in gold. Hence, it was the 'lethal gold' that only killed humans... That and the hypothesis of Code Lost happens to—"
Miyazawa Kenya kept chattering nonstop until he finally noticed Loki's expression.
"—Oh, sorry, don't make such a scary look. I have no intention of prying further. I only want to continue my research, that's all."
"Don't you think—you have already pried too deeply into this matter?"
Loki narrowed his eyes and asked. Miyazawa Kenya waved his hand ostentatiously.
"Hey hey, don't be like that. Since you've investigated me, you ought to know how Asgard recruited me. You do not wish to make an enemy of 'Gray,' do you?"
".....Indeed."
Loki nodded slightly and dispelled his murderous aura.
"Phew, I thought I was going to be killed. Then back to the earlier subject. If it was him—if it was your Fafnir—could he really defeat Kraken Zwei?"
"Do you ever learn...?"

Loki sighed with a look of exasperation then turned his back to Miyazawa Kenya, leaving silently without answering his question. However, Loki suddenly stopped, a thought seemingly occurring to him.
"Oh right. I just received a piece of interesting news."
"...Interesting news?"
"Already verified. The dragon marks of several Ds have changed color. Your daughter is one of them."
"What..."
Miyazawa Kenya's expression wavered for the first time.
"It's possible to deduce from this that Kraken Zwei is capable of targeting multiple Ds simultaneously. In that case, there are only two fundamental solutions."
Loki spoke without looking back. Then he operated the panel on the side of the large trailer, opening the cargo area gradually.
Inside, several soldiers clad in silver-white armor appeared.
Unbeknownst to Miyazawa Kenya, they were all dressed the same as the one known as "Hreidmar" within NIFL.
These armored soldiers gave a kind of "inhuman" feeling. Even someone like Miyazawa Kenya who had never stepped foot on a battlefield could feel this.
Loki looked at them, standing neatly in formation inside the trailer, then turned to face Miyazawa Kenya.
Then smiling coldly, Loki told him in a deep voice:
"Namely—Defeat Kraken Zwei or eliminate all Ds."
"...!?"
Miyazawa Kenya gasped, rooted to the spot.
"This piece of news was gathered by my subordinates on their own. Midgard apparently intends to hide this. So long as they persist in denial, NIFL cannot take action overtly, however—I only need to act according to my own will in secret."
Loki grinned, then stared straight into Miyazawa Kenya's eyes after saying that.
"Go warn 2nd Lieutenant Mononobe if you're worried about your daughter. When doing so, remember to pass along this message to him from me—'You are the one making the choice.'"

*

The night grew late at Nanato City.
At the same moment when the Mononobe Yuu and the others' battle against Vritra was ending—
In the bedroom at Mitsuki's house, Kili and Lisa were waiting for Yuu's group to call them.
The crossdressing girl under the alias of John—Jeanne Hortensia—had yet to regain consciousness, so the situation in the room was as though Kili and Lisa were alone.

However, Lisa did not strike up conversation with Kili whereas Kili simply watched Jeanne's sleeping face to kill time.
But perhaps growing tired of boredom and silence, Kili turned to face Lisa.
"Hey, you love Yuu, right?"
"Huh? W-What are you suddenly talking about!?"
Lisa felt troubled by the sudden question. The content also made her blush to her ears.
"Nothing much, it just occurred to me so I asked. Just casual conversation. I simply wondered because I find that your attitude towards Yuu has changed compared to that time at the Principality of Erlia."
"T-That is your mistaken impression. My attitude towards him has certainly not changed."
Despite blushing intensely, Lisa still denied Kili's accusation.
"Really? Then you won't have any objections even if I became Yuu's partner, right?"
"What... That is neither here nor there! As friends, as family, I shan't hand him over to you!"
Lisa stood up and declared loudly.
"Friends, family huh... Amazing excuses, but if your feelings are only of that level—You won't be a match for me no matter what."
Listening to Kili's mocking words, Lisa frowned.
"What are you talking about...?"
"Because I need him more than anyone else. Belonging nowhere, I only have meaning if he chooses me."
Saying that, Kili presented her dragon mark, whose color was changing, in front of Lisa.
"This is not the color I want. I want to be colored by Yuu... A color belonging only to Yuu. Do you have this level of resolve?"
Confronted with Kili's dangerous gaze, Lisa could not help but gasp.
However, she soon regained composure. Staring straight into Kili's eyes, she was about to launch a rebuttal, but—
"Mm..."
Due to Jeanne making a noise while lying on the bed, Lisa lost her chance.
Kili turned towards Jeanne. Lisa approached the bed, intending to examine her condition.
"Hmm... mmm...?"
Jeanne moaned and opened her eyes slightly. Her golden eyes captured Kili and Lisa who were peering at her.
"Kili...? This place is—"
Jeanne shifted her gaze around blankly, observing the room's situation.
"You finally woke up, Jeanne... No, John. This is Yuu's parental home. I saved you from the Kraken's child and brought you here."
Kili dutifully corrected herself since Jeanne hated letting her gender come to light. Lisa still did not know about Jeanne's gender.
"Captain's, parental home? Kraken's, child..."

Light gradually returned to Jeanne's eyes. Then with a look of sudden realization, she sat up.
"Where is she now?!"
"She?"
Kili frowned at Jeanne's question.
"The Kraken's child!"
"—I don't know where, but Yuu and the others have gone over to defeat it. Although Mother went to obstruct them... Knowing Yuu, he will surely do everything he can to find a solution."
Despite feeling a bit troubled, Kili still explained the situation to her.
Immediately, Jeanne widened her eyes in surprise and clenched her fist.
"Extermination...? No way—Wrong... She is not..."
"Wrong? What exactly is she not?"
Kili asked incredulously whereas Jeanne replied in a hoarse voice:
"She is... not a dragon. Like us, she is—Human."

*

The burning NIFL base.
Sirens were blaring all around with the sounds of soldiers in the distance.
After the battle ended at the base, soldiers were busy with the aftermath.
While wind filled with a burning scent was blowing outdoors at the base, I watched the girls nearby.
Iris and the others were shocked and troubled by the change in color of their dragon marks.
Mitsuki, fallen into deep sleep due to poison.
Vritra, rejoicing in conviction that her plan was achieved.
Watching them, I quietly contemplated.
Right now, what was Mononobe Yuu capable of doing?
What ought to be done—?
Without needing to spend much time, I soon reached the answer.
"Vritra—Of all the things you've done, everything was pointless."
"What?"
The smile vanishing from her face, Vritra looked at me.
"I never intended to let Mitsuki fight Kraken Zwei again, because Mitsuki is unable to attack her."
Watching Mitsuki lying on the ground, I continued:
"Hence, if she must be defeated no matter what—I will be the one to do it."
Casting all confusion and hesitation away, I committed my resolve.
If that monster was both a dragon and a human—I should be able to do it.
"Kraken Zwei. She will die by my hand."
Listening to me, Vritra narrowed her eyes.
"Foolish... Thou art extinguishing humanity's potential as a species, nay?"
"Potential as a species?"
I asked what she meant.
"The third generation, born from a second-generation hybrid dragon and a D who has become its mate, will be even closer to humans. The third

generation thus engendered will even be able to mate with *ordinary humans* who do not possess the ability to generate dark matter."
"What..."
I gasped, only to see Vritra speaking with a smile:
"In this manner, the human species shall evolve, evolving into the resilient lifeforms known as dragons—"

Afterword

This is Tsukasa. Due to end-of-year schedules, this January issue is sold quite a few days earlier. Speaking of which, Volume 3 happened to be released roughly the same time last year. This really makes me feel that a year's time sure passes fast.
And during Volume 5's release, back when I thought the anime was still some time away, it's finally starting to air in January!
I am currently writing this afterword at the end of November but they have already publicized main characters' key visuals and voice cast as well as the theme songs. It feels like the moment is approaching step by step.
I always had an impression that the anime adaptation's planning was very distant from me, but as soon as it started, I was fortunate enough to be invited to script meetings and recording sessions, allowing me to watch the anime production process up close. It was a really good experience. And due to being involved directly in production, I've grown quite fond of *Unlimited Fafnir*'s anime adaptation.
The same goes for the manga adaptation drawn by Saburouta-sensei. It's very elating to see the same story presented in a new manner.
Then of course, there is the one who first expanded this story's world view and gave the characters life, Korie Riko-sensei who is in charge of illustrations for this novel series.
About to be released in paperback, this *Unlimited Fafnir* was definitely not something I could complete by my efforts alone. Even more so for the manga and anime which have received plenty of help from many people in order for the story to be born in new realms.
I honestly think that *Unlimited Fafnir* is truly "a work blessed by others." The manga will become more and more exciting and the anime will surely be a wonderful product, so please make sure you read (watch) them!
—Oh, I'm going to run out of space if I don't start talking about this volume's content.
The seventh installment in the series, *Unlimited Fafnir VII, Black Nemesis*, finally begins to touch upon Yuu's past.
Due to certain reasons, Yuu and company make their way together to his parental home at Nanato City, but encounter unexpected situations—
Basically this kind of story. Writing a story about visiting one's homeland always fills my heart with warmth inside.

Also, by the way, I only realized halfway through when I was writing, but my previous series also featured a home-returning story in Volume 7. I didn't do it on purpose, so it's only coincidence, but I guess this kind of rhythm might exist in my serialized stories.
Then next volume, we will venture deeper into the many mysteries set up so far.
In a situation where everyone has no choice but to confront *change*, what kind of "way of living" will Yuu choose? Please look forward to it.
Then I will start the acknowledgements.
Korie Riko-sensei, I've mentioned earlier too but it's all thanks to you that *Unlimited Fafnir* exists. The illustrations in this volume are very attractive too! Please continue to look after me.
Editor in charge, Shouji-sama, you've not only raised this series to a peak, but also given your support in various ways on the anime front, I am so grateful to you. As a work "blessed by others," the initial stroke of good fortune was surely the fate tying the series to Shouji-sama.
Then to all readers, I am sincerely thankful too!
Well then, see you next time.

Tsukasa, November 2014

Illustrator's Afterword

あとがき
木の夢で拘束
キーリさんver。
描きたかった…！
木の実りこ

Vine bondage, Kili version.
I wanted to draw this a long time ago...!
Korie Riko

Back to Volume 6